

NBA

→ PREVIEW 2017-18

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*How Do You
Chase the
Warriors?*
Minnesota's
Answer:
Add **Jimmy
Butler**

BY LEE JENKINS

P.34

Photography
ROBERT BECK

TROPHY HUNTER



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The unbeaten Chiefs' sensational tight end got where he is by being himself

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Despite the realignment of stars throughout the league, LeBron James is heading toward another showdown with Kevin Durant.

Photograph by
John W. McDonough

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Robert Beck (Jimmy Butler);
Brian Babineau/NBAE/Getty
Images (Kyrie Irving); Noah
Graham/NBAE/Getty Images
(Steph Curry)



SI.COM

FOR OCT. 16-23, 2017

STARS ALIGN

NBA tip-off is just days away, and SI has you covered. The Crossover continues its 2017-18 season preview by examining the story lines and outsized personalities poised to capture fans' attention. Rohan Nadkarni introduces us to the other side of the Heat's **Dion Waiters** and shows that he's not [always] the loudmouthed, wild-shooting Internet meme we've come to know and love. And Andrew Sharp examines the 76ers, who are led by one of the league's more promising young stars: **Joel Embiid**. For all that and more, including title predictions—can *anyone* dethrone the Warriors?—go to **SI.com/NBA**



CALL IT LIKE YOU SEE IT

We've all been there, yelling at our TVs or going on Twitter to complain about the announcers working our favorite team's game. But let's be honest: While you may think you could do a better job, calling a game well is difficult work. Days of preparation, building chemistry with the analyst sitting next to you, ignoring the haters—as pros like ESPN's Mike Breen or NBC's **Mike Tirico** can tell you, handling play-by-play is extremely demanding. So, who does it best? On Friday, Richard Deitsch will have his say, revealing his rankings and counting down the sports world's top 25 play-by-play announcers.



COLLEGE DAZE

March Madness may be many months off, but now is the perfect moment to scout the field and gain an advantage over your friends come bracket time. With the season looming, go to **SI.com/college-basketball** to see our 10 National Player of the Year candidates [will Duke's **Grayson Allen** make the cut?], a ranking of the top 50 players in the country and a sneak peek at the freshmen who are ready to make an impact.





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1
of
3

**Leading
Off**

MLB PLAYOFFS

Homegrown Cooking

BY BEN REITER

Two months before making his Astros debut, in June 2015, Carlos Correa already had a locker in Minute Maid Park. That was second baseman José Altuve's handiwork. While the 20-year-old Correa toiled with Triple A Fresno, Altuve, then 25, wrote the shortstop's name on athletic tape and affixed it above the empty cubicle next to his. Altuve wanted not only to reserve a spot for his future double play partner but also to send a message to management to speed the rebuilding process after six straight losing seasons. "I wanted him here," Altuve said then. "Everyone knew he was ready."

Through Sunday the most discussed trend of this MLB postseason has been the rise of "bullpenning"—that is, managers turning games over to their bullpens earlier and more often. Of the first 213 innings, relievers threw 111 $\frac{2}{3}$ %, or 52.4%. An equally important trend, though, has been the predominance of hitters who were drafted and signed, or at least developed, by the clubs for whom they're now starring, despite ever-escalating free-agency contracts and blockbuster trades.

Altuve and Correa, now in the third season of their partnership, have led the way. Altuve, the AL batting champ and a leading MVP

George Springer, drafted 11th in 2011, went airborne to score in Houston's Game 3 loss to the Red Sox.

PHOTOGRAPH BY
WINSLOW TOWNSON





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2
of
3

Leading Off

contender, hit three home runs in Houston's first ALDS game against the Red Sox, and Correa slugged a bomb in each of the next two.

The duo accounted for five of the Astros' first seven playoff homers and 10 of their 18 RBIs. If they were the most notable examples of homegrown hitters excelling under this October's klieg lights, they were not alone. Consider:

- Francisco Lindor, the Indians' 23-year-old shortstop, who hooked a two-out, sixth-inning grand slam inside the rightfield foul pole to spark a comeback from a five-run deficit in last Friday's ALDS 9-8 Game 2 win over the Yankees.

- The Nationals' Bryce Harper, 25, and Ryan Zimmerman, 33—first-round picks five years apart—whose home runs produced all five runs in the bottom of the eighth in Game 2 of the NLDS, erasing a 3-1 Cubs lead and knotting the series.

- The Dodgers' Yasiel Puig, 26, who in his five years in L.A. has transformed from sui generis phenom to overly excitable bust to steady (if still excitable) contributor. Puig, signed from Cuba in 2012, went 5 for 9 in the Dodgers' pair of NLDS-opening wins over the Diamondbacks and drove in two runs in each.

- The Red Sox' Jackie Bradley Jr., 27, and Rafael Devers, 20, who combined for two homers and six RBIs on Sunday to help stave off an Astros' sweep with

Gio González (top) benefited from the Nationals' Game 2 comeback; Lindor (bottom left) went deep to spark a comeback; Greg Bird, a homegrown Yankees slugger, homered for the only run in Game 3.

**PHOTOGRAPHS BY
SIMON BRUTY (GONZÁLEZ); GREGORY
SHAMUS/GETTY IMAGES (LINDOR);
ERICK W. RASCO (BIRD)**





+

3
of
3

Leading Off

a come-from-behind 10-3 win.

In fact, while just over half—52.5%—of the hitters on this postseason's rosters have never worn a different big league jersey, those players have produced a disproportionate amount of its runs: 73.0% of its homers (27 of 37) and 62.5% of its RBIs (75 of 120).

There is a logical explanation for this: The game's window for stardom has shifted younger—as MLB has become more athletic and, presumably, less riddled with career-extending performance-enhancing drugs—and young run producers usually remain under the control of the clubs that groomed them.

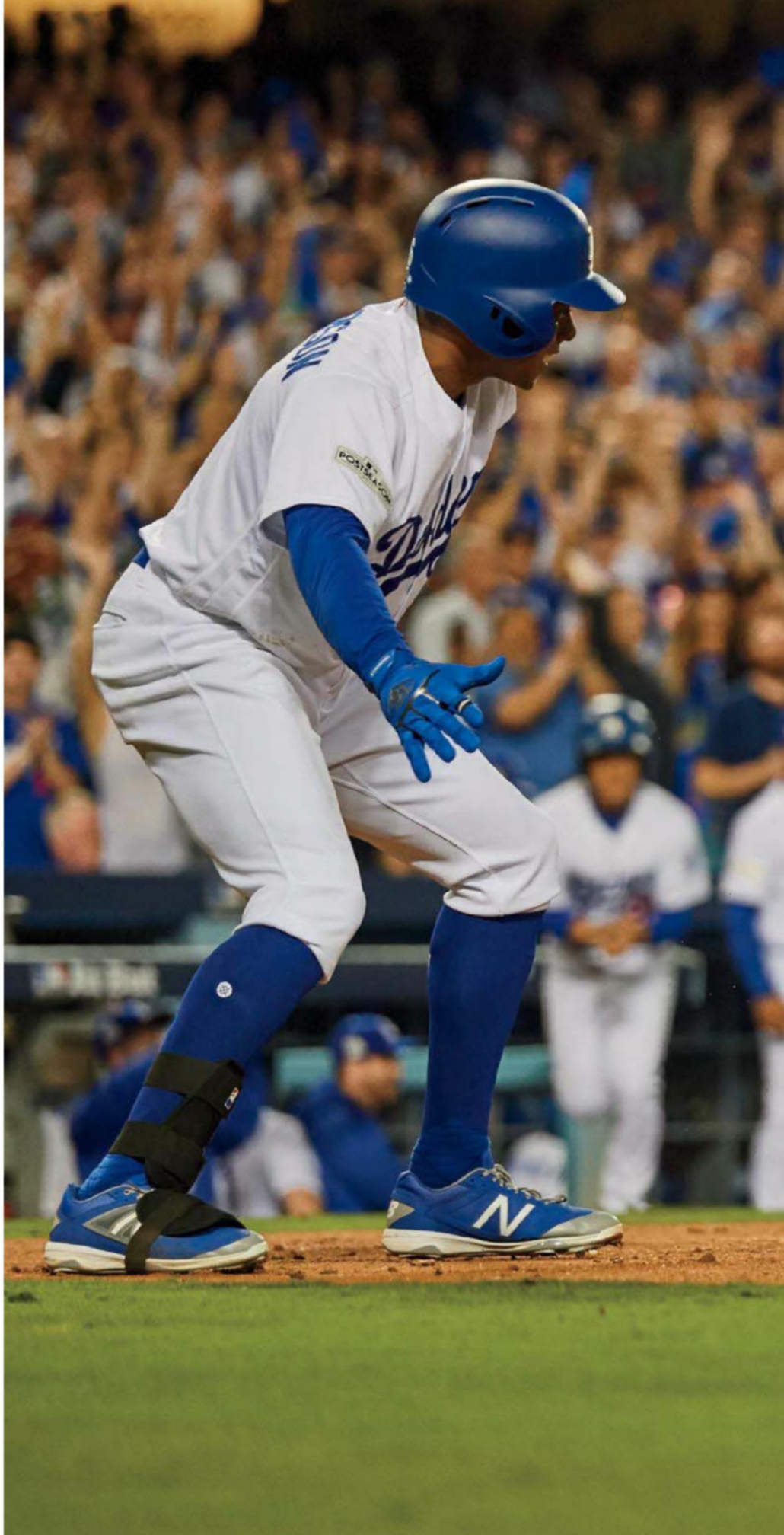
But there's also an explanation that is more difficult to quantify: chemistry. Homegrown players tend to have worked together for years to reach these big moments. Along the way they often forge a bond that allows them to seize those moments—and to face all those fireballing relievers—for each other, not just for themselves.

"Every single year our friendship grows," Correa said of Altuve last week. "Turning double plays, having good times and everything. He hits a home run or I hit a home run—we're like brothers out there."

Of course, there will always be a place for highly paid transplants, like Dodgers third baseman Justin Turner [one homer, five RBIs so far this postseason] and Indians rightfielder Jay Bruce (two homers, four RBIs), both former Mets. Still, the playoffs' first week provided a clear lesson: October success will no longer be bought, but grown. □

Rookie slugger Cody Bellinger (35) contributed to the Dodgers' 17-run outburst in two wins over Arizona.

PHOTOGRAPH BY
ROBERT BECK





INBOX

FOR OCT. 2, 2017

The media, NFL owners and the commissioner are colluding to target the wrong audience.

The vast majority of us enjoy a good game and individual athletic performance. We do not like unsolicited lectures on social morality, and we certainly do not like political theater at the expense of our national anthem.

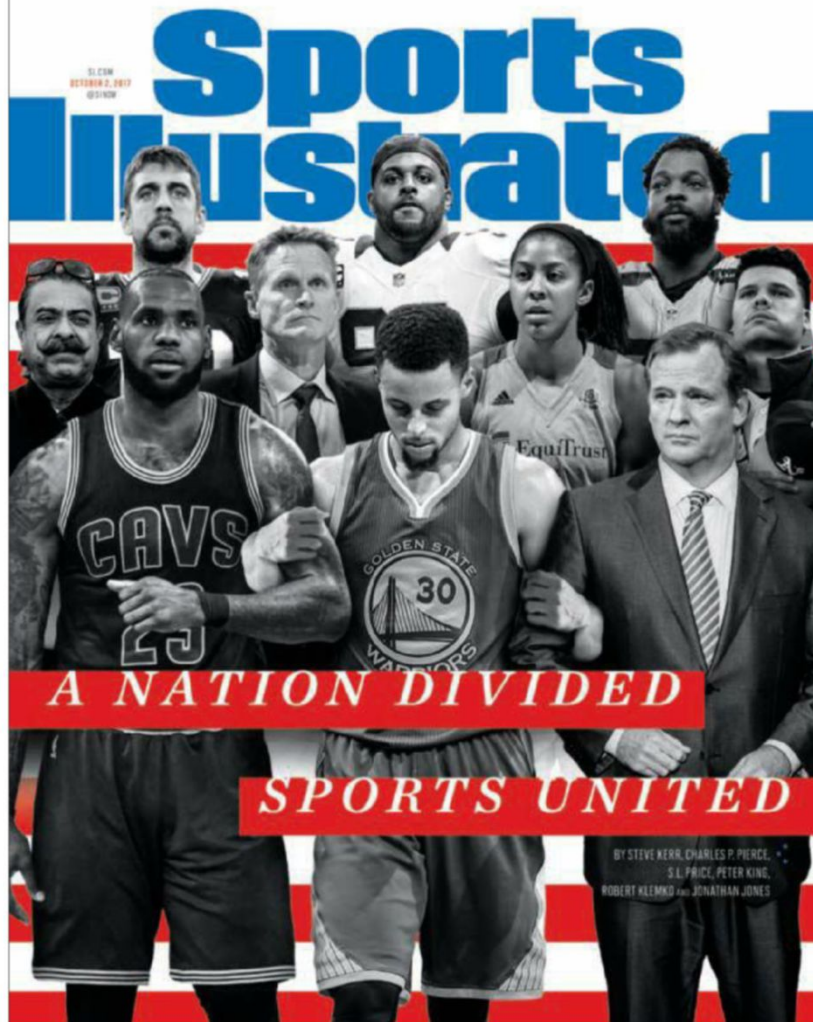
Robert M. Boyd
WINNSBORO, TEXAS

As an eight-year-old boy living on an Army base, I learned that when you were outside and heard the reveille, you should face the flagpole and stand at attention. I maintained that respect for the flag when I was on active duty and in the 50 years since. I respect a person's right to protest. I do not, however, accept that the time and place to do so is during the national anthem—unless you are protesting the United States.

Laurance F. Sitter
PORTLAND

Roger Goodell? Really? His weak comments showing the mildest support for the protests gives him no right to be on this cover.

James Ruckman
LA MESA, CALIF.



Your well-intentioned cover is a travesty. To portray “A NATION DIVIDED, SPORTS UNITED” without prominently featuring Colin Kaepernick, the athlete who first took a stand by taking a knee, is absurd.

Mark Mohr, VANCOUVER, WASH.

It's unfortunate that issues such as racism and police brutality are being overshadowed by the issue of standing for the national anthem. If athletes really want to effect change, I suggest they articulate their ideas through words instead of silent and irrelevant protestations.

Seavan Sternheim
PALO ALTO, CALIF.

I read with interest your many articles concerning the protests at NFL games. One would have thought, in fairness, that you'd have at least one article in support of the President's position. Since half of Americans disapprove of these athletes' actions, it would have been the logical thing to do.

Gregory Mangold
STERLING HEIGHTS, MICH.

Thank you for this issue and for deftly addressing the rights of athletes to stand up for what they believe in despite negative attacks from the public, in general, and the President, in particular. I usually donate my read copies of SI to the waiting room of the medical facility where I work, but this one, I will save.

Harm Wilkinson
GUALALA, CALIF.

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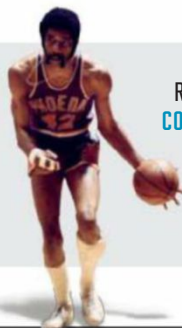
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REMEMBERING
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SCORECARD

Edited by ALBERT CHEN + SARAH KWAK



BONDING AGENTS

Erik Haula (56) and Griffin Reinhart were among the players who visited police headquarters after the shooting.

■ **WHILE THEIR BULK** coffee order at Starbucks was busy brewing, Deryk and Melissa Engelland dashed to the grocery store. They grabbed premade sandwiches, fresh fruit and bottles of Gatorade—anything to help nourish first responders who had been working around the clock. “We have to do something,” the Vegas Golden Knights defenseman had told his wife, and everywhere they found other groups of locals driven by similar instincts.

The previous night, Oct. 1, Engelland had returned home after the Golden Knights’ final exhibition game, put his two sons to bed and fallen asleep early. Hours later, around 12:30 a.m., one of Melissa’s close friends called and, in a panicked voice, told them to turn on the television. Four miles away—and only a 20-minute walk from the team’s home rink at T-Mobile Arena—a lone gunman had opened fire on concertgoers at the Route 91 Harvest festival, spraying bullets from the 32nd floor of the Mandalay Bay, killing almost five dozen and wounding hundreds more.

As cellphone footage of the horror looped on the news, the nine-year NHL veteran watched with a familiar pit in his stomach. On Sept. 11, 2001, Engelland, 35, was running on the treadmill at the New Jersey Devils’ practice facility when, across the Hudson River, two hijacked planes struck the Twin Towers. On April 19, 2013, he was locked down at a Boston hotel with the Penguins when police embarked on a citywide manhunt for the

HOCKEY AND HEALING

In the wake of unspeakable tragedy, the Vegas Golden Knights try to bring comfort to their new hometown

BY ALEX PREWITT

brothers who bombed the marathon four days earlier. And now one of the deadliest mass shootings in U.S. history had been carried out from a hotel that Engelland can see from his back porch.

"It's crazy I was in the proximity for all of them," he says, though this also means Engelland understands the small roles that sports played after each tragedy. There were the Yankees, who welcomed President George W. Bush to throw out the first pitch at Game 3 of the 2001 World Series. There was David Ortiz, five days after the pressure cookers detonated on Boylston Street, telling Fenway Park, "This is our f----- city."

"Vegas is our new home," Garrison says. "For something so devastating to happen, you just have to give as much support as you can."

That is the connection Engelland feels with Las Vegas. He met Melissa 14 years ago, when she was a graduate student at UNLV and he was a minor leaguer with the ECHL's Wranglers. He has spent most summers since in Las Vegas, skating in an annual charity game with local firefighters.

As Vegas's first major pro sports franchise, the Golden Knights were always going to hold a special place in the city's heart. And though none of Engelland's teammates had lived in Las Vegas before arriving less than two months ago, the bonds are being forged far faster than expected, albeit

at a horrible cost. "Now Vegas is our new home," defenseman Jason Garrison says. "For something so devastating to happen so soon into this, you just have to give as much support as you can."

In the days after the attacks, players fanned into the community. They posed for pictures at police headquarters, where talk quickly turned to the upcoming season. They signed autographs for fans waiting to donate blood. At the convention center, they hugged a crying couple who had lost a friend at the concert. "I'll remember that forever," Engelland says. "Seeing what they went

through, how much they're hurting right now. You want to do so much more."

Every bit helps. Engelland and defenseman Nate Schmidt each bought 20-game ticket packages for surviving victims and first responders. Foundations run by Vegas owner Bill Foley, the NHL and the Chicago Wolves—Vegas's minor-league affiliate—together donated \$500,000. Last Friday, as the Golden Knights won their season-opener in Dallas, 2-1, a viewing party raised money to support Nick Robone, an assistant coach for UNLV's club ice hockey team who was shot but

survived. "I knew [Las Vegas] was a small town and everyone is there for everyone," Engelland says, "but it's definitely showing a whole new side, how much everyone wants to help."

Making their home debut Tuesday, each of the Knights was escorted onto the ice by a local first responder, and the team held a 58-second moment of silence, during which the names of the 58 slain were projected onto the ice.

Ultimately how the Golden Knights fit into the healing process isn't really up to them. Their games might comfort some, inspire others, or maybe even feel trivial. Regardless, they are part of Las Vegas now. That's the message Robone gave a group of players who surprised him at the trauma ICU at Sunrise Hospital on Oct. 4. Largely thanks to his younger brother Anthony, a 25-year-old firefighter and paramedic who also attended the concert, Nick, 28, survived a bullet wound to his left chest. He faces a long recovery from a bruised lung. "Not everyone has the same amount of support I do," he told them. "I have a professional hockey team coming to visit me."

In other words, the city needs them. "From where they're at, as these new leaders of our community, they have this platform, they have this way to reach out to every corner of the valley," Anthony says. "It's a big step for these guys. But the way they've presented themselves, the medium they have, I think they can handle it." □

GO
FIGURE

X

7



Road games the Patriots will travel to this regular season on one of their two customized Boeing 767s, unveiled last week. With AirKraft—outfitted with all first-class seats—New England is the first NFL team to use its own planes to travel to games.

\$1,908



The opening bid, and a nod to the year 1908, for what is claimed to be an official 2016 Cubs World Series ring. An unidentified scout put the ring up for sale on Leland's Auctions on Sept. 27; by Monday, the bidding had surpassed \$40,000.

20%

Stake that Laurene Powell Jobs, widow of Steve Jobs, will hold in the Wizards and Capitals after approval of her reported \$500 million investment in Monumental Sports & Entertainment, making her one of the most prominent female owners in sports.





Bethany Hamilton Pro Surfer

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+RUNNING

CATCH HIM IF YOU CAN

A Paralympian's next challenge

■ **IF YOU HAPPEN** to see a man with prosthetic legs running a marathon in your town this month, don't be surprised. It's just another day at the office for Rob Jones.

Jones is running 31 marathons in 31 cities in 31 days. This may sound insane, but Jones, 32, specializes in making the insane sane. In 2014 he rode a bicycle from Maine to California in winter, and not just any winter. Remember the polar vortex?

Jones doesn't have to do this. But he didn't have to join the Marines, either. A decade ago he was a student at Virginia Tech and chose to be a Marine.

He didn't wait until graduation, when he could have tried to be an officer. He wanted to be a grunt.

Jones became a lance corporal. His job was detecting improvised explosive devices. One day, in Afghanistan, he missed an IED. It blew his legs off.

Jones went through a long, grueling rehab. Some people would just hope to perform everyday tasks again. Jones has accomplished a lot more than that. In 2012, at the Paralympics in London, he and fellow rower Oksana Masters won bronze.

Now he is running a month of marathons. His first race is this week in



London; 29 of his next 30 are in the U.S., and the other is in Toronto. You can find the itinerary at robjonesjourney.com and sign up to run with him.

Jones wants to become "a better version of himself." He's also raising money for the Coalition to Salute America's Heroes, the Tunnel to Towers Foundation and the Injured Marine Semper Fi Fund. He raised \$125,000 during his

bike ride and wants to hit \$1 million within a month.

He also wants to show fellow injured veterans that there is life beyond amputation. And he wants Americans to connect with vets, and show everybody the value of sacrificing time and energy for a larger goal.

—Michael Rosenberg

VIDEO ON SI.COM

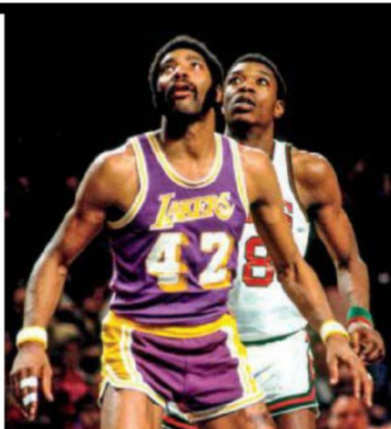
For more on Rob Jones and his journey, go to SI.com

+1942-2017

CONNIE HAWKINS

HE ONCE seemed like an urban legend, a myth, one of those shadowy figures who fit comfortably into a once-prevalent stereotype: the city kid who wasn't very smart, who jettisoned his future with bad decisions and who was comfortable only on asphalt, never able to tailor his aerial acrobatics to the strictures of organized hoops.

Except it was wrong. Connie Hawkins, who died last week at 75, may have been undereducated, but he was a thoughtful man who got caught up in events beyond his control and whose game, once he got a chance to show it to a mainstream audience, was splendidly



versatile, highlighted, to be sure, by a superb athleticism that predated Julius Erving, among others.

The Brooklyn-born Hawk (*above*, 42) could dunk, it was said, by the time he was 11. While at Iowa, Hawkins was questioned regarding a widespread investigation into

point-shaving, one that led to the arrests of 37 students from 22 colleges. Hawkins was never arrested or charged, but he was—to use a dreaded word—implicated. Thrown out of Iowa and barred from playing in the NBA, he became a hoops nomad (the Harlem Globetrotters, the American Basketball League, the ABA) before he successfully sued the NBA and was allowed to play in 1969. He was then 27 but made an immediate difference for the Phoenix Suns, averaging 25 points in a '70 first-round playoff loss to the Lakers.

The Hawk was elected to the Hall of Fame in 1992. His body of work alone probably would not have gotten him into Springfield, but he had Hall of Fame style, and basketball owed him a Hall of Fame debt. —Jack McCallum



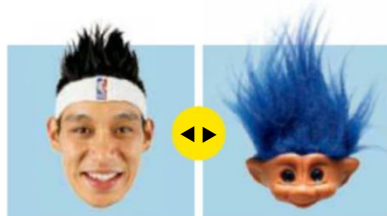
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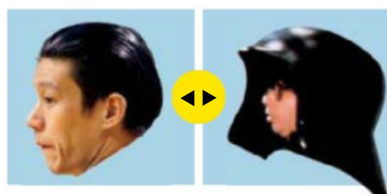
Getting to the root of one NBA player's ever-evolving mop

■ **LAST WEEK** Nets point guard Jeremy Lin unveiled his latest 'do—dreadlocks—and wrote an essay for The Players' Tribune about what's behind his eye-catching coifs (a piece that in all seriousness is worth reading). Though he was ridiculed by former NBA star Kenyon Martin for the dreads, to be fair, it's not even Lin's worst look. Take a moment to remember the many manes of Lin and the possible inspirations for his styles.

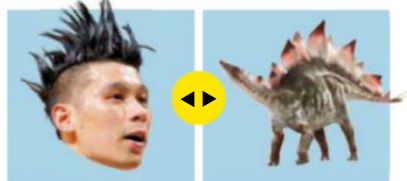


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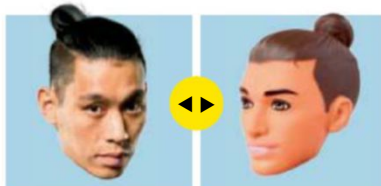


2016

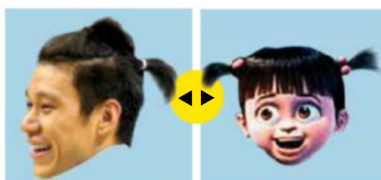
DARK HELMET
FROM SPACE BALLS

2015

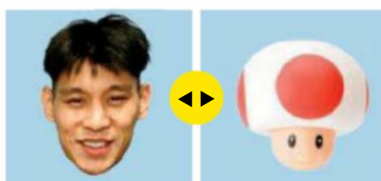
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THEY SAID IT

"YEAH, WE RAN THE SAME PLAY TWICE.... WE WERE RUNNING OUT OF THEM."



Tim Lester

Western Michigan coach, on his options late in a 71-68 victory over Buffalo, a seven-overtime game that set an FBS record for total points.



SIGN OF THE APOCALYPSE

Suspended Louisville AD **Tom Jurich** reportedly earned \$5.3 million in taxable income in 2016, more than the university budgeted for its departments of biology (\$3.3 million), English (\$4 million) or math (\$3.5 million).

Alex Ovechkin

The Capitals' winger became the first NHL player in 100 years to start a season with back-to-back hat tricks.



HOT ▲
NOT ▼



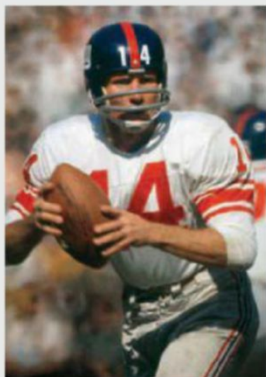
Chris Foerster

The Dolphins offensive line coach resigned after a video surfaced showing him doing some offensive lines.

LIN CHART: FROM TOP LEFT TO RIGHT: KENT SMITH/NBAE/GETTY IMAGES; BILL O'LEARY/THE WASHINGTON POST/GETTY IMAGES; NATHANIEL S. BUTLER/NBAE/GETTY IMAGES; COURTESY OF MATTEU; MIKE LAWRIE/GETTY IMAGES; MGN/EVERETT COLLECTION; JEREMY BREYARD/USA TODAY SPORTS; WALT DISNEY/EVERETT COLLECTION; ROCKY W. WIDNER/GETTY IMAGES; SCIERPRO/GETTY IMAGES; ANDREW D. BERNSTEIN/NBAE/GETTY IMAGES; ISTOCK/GETTY IMAGES; TIMOTHY D. EASLEY/AP/REX/SHUTTERSTOCK (JURICH); GREG HUME/NHL/GETTY IMAGES (OVECHKIN); AP (FOERSTER); DUANE BURLESON/GETTY IMAGES (LESTER)



Life gets plain if you don't add flavor.
Life's tasty. Crunch on.



TRIBUTE

Y.A. TITTLE (1926–2017)

■ **The man** known as the Bald Eagle—as much for his steady leadership of three NFL teams over 17 seasons as for his prematurely receding hairline—never won a championship during his Hall of Fame career, but when he retired in 1964, Y.A. Tittle, who died Sunday at 90, was the NFL's alltime leader in passing yards and TDs. The league MVP in 1963, he may be best remembered for a black-and-white photograph from his final season, 1964. In it, a helmetless Tittle—moments after an interception—kneels, blood trickling down his face. Taken at a time when concussions were barely acknowledged and CTE was unheard of, the photo elicits different feelings today. One reaction is the same though: The subject had given his all to the game. □



James McCully | *North Eastham, Mass.* | *Soccer*

James, a senior midfielder at Nauset Regional High, scored two goals, including the game-winner, in a 3–1 victory over Martha's Vineyard. Through eight matches he has 15 goals and seven assists. Last season James netted 38 goals—one shy of the school record set by his father and coach, John—to lead the Warriors to the Division 2 state title.



Ellie Holzman | *Kenner, La.* | *Volleyball*

Ellie, a 6' 2" junior middle blocker at Mount Carmel Academy in New Orleans, had 38 kills, 22 digs and three aces in a five-set win over Archbishop Hannan. Last season she led the Cubs to a 41–11 record and their second straight Division I championship, recording 677 kills, 549 digs, 322 blocks and 19 aces. Ellie has committed to Illinois.



Chazz Middlebrook | *Jacksonville, Ill.* | *Football*

Middlebrook, a 5' 6", 200-pound senior running back at MacMurray College in Jacksonville, rushed for 288 yards and three touchdowns in a 22–14 victory over Rockford. Through five games he has 982 yards and 13 TDs. Last year Middlebrook ran for 1,703 yards and 18 touchdowns and led Division III in rushing average [170.3].

FACES IN THE CROWD

Edited by JEREMY FUCHS



Katarina Polyviou | *Cranford, N.J.* | *Field Hockey*

Polyviou, a sophomore goalie at Division III DeSales University, had three shutouts to start the season. She made one save in a 3–0 win over Moravian, five in a 1–0 victory over Muhlenberg and seven to beat Marywood 1–0. Through 11 games she has allowed 13 goals on 112 shots. Last year Katarina was honorable mention All-MAC Freedom.



Justin Fields | *Kennesaw, Ga.* | *Football*

Justin, a senior quarterback at Harrison High, threw for 228 yards and four touchdowns and ran for two more scores in a 44–14 victory over East Paulding. Through five games he has thrown for 974 yards and 12 TDs while rushing for 575 yards and 10 scores. Justin, who is the top-ranked player in the country, has committed to Georgia.



Chuck Combs | *Carmel, Ind.* | *Golf*

Combs, 76, a retired banker, hit three holes in one from varying distances within 32 days on the 8th hole at Wood Wind Golf Course in Westfield. On June 22 he hit a 5-iron 156 yards; three days later he hit an 8-iron 138 yards; and on July 24, Combs, the volunteer ranger at the course, hit a 9-iron 126 yards for the fourth ace of his career.

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The Case for ... LOWERING THE NBA AGE MINIMUM

BY JEREMY WOO

■ **LET'S BE PERFECTLY** clear: There's no one-step solution to college basketball's black-market problem, exposed again most recently by the announcement of the FBI's investigation into corruption. The FBI's findings weren't especially surprising—the money is there for almost anyone who can provide value. It is a system that has long asked to be gamed, born out of the NCAA's failure to compensate basketball players—and student-athletes in general—for what they're worth. Compounding the problem is the NBA's age minimum, which locks would-be pros into a year of college.

As NBA commissioner Adam Silver has said, the “one-and-done” rule isn't working for anyone. College is a rewarding experience for most, but the notion that all players benefit from a year of school is farcical. Take Ben Simmons, the 2016 No. 1 pick who admitted to skipping classes after his first semester at LSU. He knew he was turning pro and would be among the top players selected. Elite prospects like Simmons (*above*) are prevented from profiting off their skills for an extra year, and many come from backgrounds where any earnings can be meaningful for a player and his family. Thus there is incentive for recruits to seek handouts that coaches and sneaker companies are eager to give. Every year



these teenagers are paid under the table. Why not let them profit legally?

Silver has expressed interest in *raising* the minimum age from 19 to 20, but *lowering* it would serve the players' interests—and could help clean up college hoops in the process. Why not drop the age limit to 18 and let agents recruit and sign high school seniors? Make hiring representation a binding commitment to entering the draft, but let the best high schoolers eliminate the college recruiters early in the process. Allow NBA scouts into high school gyms, and let them give feedback that might help prospects on the fence. Those players who are unselected can go to the G League and work up. The free market is allowed to work, and a large chunk of the

middlemen and agents—both out for profit—would focus on counseling talented prospects rather than on ensnaring middling college players.

NBA teams value the opportunity to thoroughly scout draft picks, and it's not the league's moral obligation to free players from a broken system. But while former commissioner David Stern's old line was that college breeds maturity and preparation, the league is better equipped to help teens succeed. Every franchise will soon have G League affiliates. The quality of coaching and player development has improved. The Rookie Transition Program has succeeded in giving career advice to players. If the league doubled down on that investment in its future employees, it could be part of the solution.

Yes, the college game would lose star power, but perhaps schools will focus on recruiting players they can develop over multiple seasons, the sort of four-year rarities that college hoops purists fondly recall. Continuity will help college recruits make better choices and improve the NCAA's product, too. A prospect could better project his playing time at a school he's considering if he had a clearer picture of which players are coming back.

This is not a perfect fix—whatever the FBI investigation turns up, ambitious coaches and deep-pocketed companies will learn to operate in a thinner market. Lowering the minimum would at least give players a clearer career choice. While nobody is naive enough to think an NBA rule tweak can save college hoops from itself, a push from the pros wouldn't hurt. If the recent FBI reports are any indication, the college hoops business can't get worse, right? □

BY THE NUMBERS

×

16

Freshmen selected in the first round of the 2017 draft, the most ever.

8

Straight seasons the No. 1 overall pick has been a one-and-done player.

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Kansas City fans are pleading, Dear God, please just*



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BY **Dan Greene**
Photographs by **Jeffery A. Salter**



THOSE WHO know Travis Kelce best are prone to employ his name as an adjective. Cutoff denim, for instance, is very Travis. A cream Gucci suit, splattered with red drawings of a pirate Donald Duck and paired with a Smokey the Bear-style hat (his outfit at a recent charity fashion show)—that was so Travis. The most Travis thing about Kelce's Kansas City apartment might be that he employs one of his two bedrooms as a third walk-in closet, depository for various snake-collared shirts and Christian Louboutin kicks.

But when I meet Kelce in his apartment building's lounge, he is clad in an unexpectedly un-Travis outfit: white Nike tee and red gym shorts, white Nike Prestos and a black compression sleeve around his left leg. I toss out an innocuous question about whether he's lived in this building, in the downtown Power & Light District, for all four of his years as a Chiefs tight end, and he does a fairly Travis thing, letting slip a truth he'd probably rather not tell through a smile that disarms it.

His first two seasons in town he lived down the street. But, he says, "my neighbors didn't like me." Kelce missed just about his entire rookie year after having microfracture surgery on his left knee, which made him a 24-year-old with an abundance of money and no shortage of free time. Thus followed raucous nights that began and ended at Kelce's apartment, which friends loved but which the doctor next door decidedly did not. After a few admonishments from the leasing office, Kelce noted the new luxury building nearby, in which he would be the first tenant of his unit and where he would have floor-to-ceiling windows. "Everything just made sense," he says. So here he is.

But this is not where he is supposed to be now. Today's plan was for me to tag along with Kelce on a promotional stunt delivering pizzas for Papa John's, one of his many sponsors; some lucky local would answer the doorbell, unscrunch some loose bills from a pocket and look up to see—*surprise!*—the dancing face of the NFL's lone undefeated team. It would've been fun. It would've been so Travis.

That face has been popping up in more and more places: on a monstrous video screen in Times Square and in NBC's *Sunday Night Football* intro, onstage alongside Carrie Underwood. There was even a short-lived reality dating show on E!, *Catching Kelce*. Tony Gonzalez, this town's last megastar tight end, thinks Kelce's media appeal is obvious: He speaks freely and "doesn't give a s---." When I ask Aaron Eanes, Kelce's manager, why sponsors enjoy working with the 2016 All-Pro, he says,





JAMIE SQUIRE/GETTY IMAGES

“You can tell Travis gives a s---.” Being Travis, then, means both giving and not giving a s---. So Schrödinger, so Travis.

Kelce is not out there surprising local pizza lovers today for the same reason that he is sporting that black sleeve. Forty-eight hours earlier, in a Week 2 win over the Eagles, he scored a very Travis touchdown, taking a shovel pass from the 18-yard line and propelling all 260 pounds of his 6' 5" frame through the air, lifting off at the five and landing in the end zone while absorbing hits from two defenders. It was one of many plays he is still feeling two days later and, well, he says it would be weird to deliver pizzas with a slight, stiff limp.

The soaring touchdown, however, was only half of what made that Sunday particularly Travis. Earlier in the game he'd celebrated Kareem Hunt's 53-yard TD dash by running to the Eagles' sideline and delivering some choice words to a defender. *Unsportsmanlike conduct; 15 yards on the kickoff.* It was, dating back to last January's playoff loss to the Steelers, the third straight game in which Kelce's behavior drew such a penalty. Against Philly, Chiefs coach Andy Reid lit into him on the sideline and afterward said, “He's got to learn.” K.C. news outlets, meanwhile, bemoaned the very Travis combination of 103 receiving yards and yet another foul for misconduct. On the radio the next afternoon one host described Kelce's behavior as “what a little kid does.” Someone else compared the tight end to a child who hadn't outgrown his binky.

When we meet, Kelce has yet to address the subject. Not that reporters didn't try: Having dodged three postgame questions on the matter, he asked, “Any other questions?” He tells me he anticipated the queries and didn't plan to address them. He didn't want to get riled up and say something he might regret. “I just felt like I didn't owe anybody an explanation,” he says. Which is a very Travis source of frustration. He's been having to explain himself his whole life.

TRAVIS KELCE entered the NFL in a very Travis way, and for maximum effect I will cede the floor and let him tell the story of the 2013 draft in his own very Travis fashion. “I got a call from an 816 number,” he says. “It just pops up on my phone as MISSOURI. I had no f--- clue Kansas City was even in Missouri—I thought it was in Kansas.” It's in both. It's confusing. “I'm like, *Nooo*, not St. Louis. They don't look like they have a bright future.

“I answered the call and it's Andy Reid,” for whom Travis's older brother, Jason, had played center in Philadelphia. “I'm like, ‘Hey, Coach! How are you? Sweet!’ He goes, ‘Yeah, listen. Are you gonna f--- this up?’ I was like, ‘Um, excuse me, coach?’ ‘Are you gonna f--- this up? I have the next pick [no. 63] and I wanna know if you're gonna be the player I need you to be or if you're gonna keep being this young punk who doesn't

HE'S SO FLY

Kelce's stat line against Philly—103 yards and a soaring TD—was solid, but it was only half the story.

listen to anybody.' I'm sitting there like, *Man, what?* 'Coach, I will be the best player you ever coached. Just give me a chance.' And he goes, 'All right, put your brother on the phone.' 'What? All right.' I still have no idea what he said to Jason. I'm assuming they had a mutual agreement, like, 'If he f---- this up, we're both kicking his ass.'"

This wasn't an unfamiliar topic of conversation. In the run-up to the draft, teams grilled Kelce about the red flags on his college résumé, culminating in a moment, described by Kelce to *GQ*, in which Ravens GM Ozzie Newsome asked, "Son, are you a f----- a-----?" Those interrogations stemmed from Kelce's penchant for scuffling and trash-talking on the field, and from the year he spent away from the college game altogether. That thread of Kelce's backstory is well-worn: As a redshirt freshman backup QB at Cincinnati he got busted smoking weed and lost his scholarship. Rather than drop out, Travis moved in with Jason—then the Bearcats' all-conference left guard—and slept on the floor while toiling at a miserable telemarketing gig.

"I HAVE THE NEXT PICK," REID SAID. "AND I WANNA KNOW IF YOU'RE GONNA KEEP BEING THIS YOUNG PUNK."

It was a shock to Kelce's system. "I knew, *All right, this isn't a joke*," he says. Cincinnati allowed him back a year later as a walk-on, on the condition that he switch full-time to tight end, which he hated in part because he went from potentially handling every snap to, in reality, catching just 13 passes in his entire junior season. But he earned his scholarship back, and by the next year, when he caught 45 passes for 722 yards, he was one of the country's best pro prospects at tight end.

Before his suspension, Kelce says, he'd never worked particularly hard at sports. Which is not to say they weren't important. He was a restless kid with an active brother two years his elder, which meant he was in the backyard tossing around one ball or another whenever time allowed (and even when it shouldn't have, as evidenced by his report cards). Travis was talented, even without extra workouts or weight training, and competing with Jason—in everything, all the time—fostered a drive that maximized those talents. Family members tell the story of a Jason-Travis postbasketball brawl in the kitchen that destroyed both an oven and the casserole therein. And there is something revealing in how Travis describes learning to block after moving to tight end. "I was ready to hit somebody in the mouth," he says, "just like my brother's been hitting me in the mouth my entire life."

The Kelce boys starred at Cleveland Heights (Ohio) High, Jason as an all-league linebacker and Travis as a dual-threat quarterback. By then, what might charitably be called Travis's

on-field zeal was fully developed. (It has since "gotten *better*," Kelce says.) In youth hockey and lacrosse he could have established residency in the penalty box, and his parents tacked on hours by making him volunteer at the Salvation Army.

The edge forged in forever battling his older brother cut both ways. Here Travis volunteers just one anecdote (from a robust archive) that he finds suitable to share. At Heights High his basketball team was once picked to play in the local cable game of the week. Travis knew everybody—or, at least a teenager's version of everybody—would be watching. But then, in overtime, he picked up his fifth and final foul, and "I lost it," he says. "Absolutely lost it. I started motherf----- every ref there. Threw a temper tantrum."

At home that night, watching the replay on TV, he saw his meltdown and put his head in his lap. "To watch yourself flip out like that and look like you have zero control—it's not where you wanna be," he says. "But because I play with so much passion, so much fire, that's kinda where I've caught myself being."



THE FIRST thing everyone saw was the dancing. In August 2014, having recovered from his NFL rookie-year injury, Kelce announced himself to the league by capping a 69-yard preseason TD (including a four-yard dive into the end zone) with the Nae Nae. A month later, he punctuated his first regular-season score with the Shmoney dance.

"He loves attention," says his mother, Donna. "Always has." As a kid that meant mugging in home movies and clowning around in class. Even so, Kelce says he's surprised at the buzz his dances generate, the way they come up in every interview. (Before ours, he wondered aloud to Eanes about the odds that I'd raise the subject.) When Kelce dances, he says, it comes from "how much fun I'm having whoopin' some tails."

"Travis truly believes that sports is entertainment," Donna says. His dances are not some cynical tactic. They are genuine acts of expression. *Genuine* comes up a lot. In the course of our conversation, Kelce says the word somewhere between nine and 900 times. It's an important concept to him. Take his dating show. First he had to be sold on the idea—not only did he know nothing about reality shows, but he also needed to be taught to distinguish between the various Kardashians, his new E! network colleagues, before his promotional press tour. What ended up bothering him

about the show was how decidedly *not* genuine it felt. Like the episode where he took a date to a hot dog joint, even though he *hates* hot dogs. Or the fact that the Chiefs—he won't specify who, but "the most important people"—urged him to back out of the show, which made Kelce feel like he had to present a team-appropriate version of himself for cameras. Or how, once the show ultimately aired in all its innocuous goofiness, those same important people pretended they'd never objected to it in the first place. There was something irksomely ungenuine there. (Because you're surely wondering: Kelce and the show's winner have since split. He courted his current girlfriend, Kayla Nicole, more conventionally—over DMs.)

Of course, Kelce's public image has not been all dancing and dating. In a 2014 game against the Broncos, cameras caught him making a . . . um . . . *suggestively dismissive* hand motion near a referee. (Kelce later corrected the misunderstanding: The gesture was actually directed toward Denver linebacker Von Miller.) Before a playoff game the following season he mocked Tom Brady during warmups. Last year, against the Jaguars, he earned a personal foul for yelling "F--- you!" at an official who'd been ignoring him. Then he threw his towel at the same ref—"I'll give you a f----- flag!"—drawing an additional penalty and earning him an ejection. And, most prominently, in last January's division-round loss to the Steelers he cost his team 15 yards when he shoved a defensive back to the ground following a play. Afterward, he ranted to reporters about a crucial holding call against teammate Eric Fisher, declaring that the official who made it "shouldn't be able to work at f----- Foot Locker."

Given eight months to think about the last infraction, Kelce sat with NBC's Mike Tirico before this season's opener and explained how, now that he's a team captain, he "can't just be the young idiot on the field doing immature things." Two hours after that interview aired, there was Kelce getting penalized for shoving the ball into the crotch of Patriots linebacker Kyle Van Noy. (To be fair, Van Noy *did* twist Kelce's face mask.) A week later came the Eagles game and the taunting penalty he didn't feel like explaining.

Now, in this luxe lounge in his luxe building, Kelce is more candid. I ask, given the subsequent penalty, if he regrets what he said in the Tirico interview. "I probably shouldn't have said, I'm not gonna get another one," he says. "It was bold for me to say that. Whatever. I don't regret it. I really meant what I said." And the fans' frustrations? "They have a reason to be upset. It's fair for everybody to kind of give me s--- for it."

GRACE! KELCE

Quiet reserve isn't exactly the tight end's thing. Even when Kelce promises restraint, you get a showy moment or two.



PETER G. AMEN/GETTY IMAGES

I ask what he thinks his reputation is. “That I’m very passionate,” he says. “Goofy. And that I have an open heart, that I care about other people.” I start to follow up, but he adds, “Arrogant as well. I forgot to mention that.” Later, when I ask what people misunderstand about him, he brings up that word again: *arrogant*. “I feel like that’s pushed a lot more than what I really am,” he says. “Anybody who hangs around me and gives me the time of day to have a conversation, they know I’m genuine and I’m not here to be kind of that douchebag.” (This seems to check out.)

Eanes chimes in: “I think people try to extrapolate [from] the way he plays on the field and say, This is who he is *off* the field.”

“That is a great point,” Kelce says. “*Extrapolate*. I forgot to use that word.”

For a player who often loses himself between the lines, Kelce can be keenly self-aware. When Eanes shares a story about overhearing a woman in a restaurant remark that she’s sure Kelce has an ego, Kelce explains how essential an ego is to an NFL player. He reads media coverage of himself, he says, because he wants to know what his parents might be reading about their son. He tries not to let it bother him. He doesn’t always succeed. “When I do take it personally,” he says, “it’s because they’re obviously saying something negative that I don’t want them to say. But I’m giving them ammo to say that.”

Last fall Kelce was at an airport when his phone battery died. He didn’t have a charger so he picked up a book, which he now leaves on a table in his kitchen: *The Daily Stoic: 366 Meditations on Wisdom, Perseverance, and the Art of Living*. Every page corresponds to a calendar date, and he makes a point each morning of reading that day’s insight and absorbing its lessons. (The entry one day after our meeting is titled “Life Isn’t a Dance.”) The book “tells you, basically, that you can’t control anything other than your reactions,” Kelce says. “You’re the most powerful person in this world when you have to make a decision. And then you have arguably no power at all after that.”

KELCE’S NEW neighbors seem to like him. They’re a younger crowd, many of whom work in Kansas City’s tech sector, which Kelce tells me is bigger than you’d think. When he gets talking about his adopted home city he can sound like he moonlights on the tourism board. *The food is amazing! Have you checked out the arts district? There’s this thing called First Fridays.* . . . He gushes about an old speakeasy a few blocks away, the Phoenix, with “a guy who plays

the saxophone, the trumpet and tap dances,” as if he’s discovered the world’s eighth wonder. “Every Friday, four to eight. *Every single Friday!*”

In the wake of Kelce’s string of boneheaded penalties, Kansas City’s feelings about him can be a bit more complicated. “There’s a love-hate to it, but it’s predominantly love,” says WHB-AM radio host Soren Petro, who’s quick to point out how much *he* likes Kelce. “[K.C.’s fans] are on the edge of the cliff. They’re still on the love level, but they can see over the edge.”

In the three games after we meet, Kelce will commit zero personal fouls. But you get little credit for that kind of streak. The next time one happens—after Kelce returns from the concussion he suffered Sunday—the finger-wagging will resume, and Kelce knows that. “I play the game with a lot of emotion,” he says. “There are some things that get to me that I’m gonna have to control. And I am working on that. I’m very aware that what I’m doing is unacceptable. At the same time, I’m not going to shy away from anything. I’m going to be who I am. That’s what’s gotten me here.”

Being Travis, after all, is how he kept up with a bigger, stronger, NFL-bound brother all those years. It’s how he survives weekly exhibitions of violence on fields full of even more bigger, stronger brothers, where, as he says, “literally half the stuff we’re allowed to do is illegal

in life.” It’s how he could play six games last season with a torn labrum in his left shoulder and still average almost 90 yards in that stretch. It’s how he can take this stage and both strut like Ric Flair in the end zone and also deliver a social message by kneeling during the national anthem, as he did in Week 3.

Being Travis is what has talk-radio hosts chastising him on Monday mornings . . . and buzzing about the Chiefs’ reaching their first Super Bowl in 48 years. Sometimes he might be too Travis for his own good, but how can he stop when he believes being Travis is how he got so good in the first place?

Our conversation eventually strays back to that most Travis of TDs, the leaping score against the Eagles. “I’ve always kind of in my head looked at it and said, You know, I could easily dive from the five-yard line,” Kelce says. “So there was no hesitation.”

“Glad you did it,” Eanes says. “But the memes if you had not scored?”

“Oh, it would’ve been hilarious,” Kelce admits. “Any publicity’s good publicity. You gotta have fun with it, man.” Then he shoots me a smile and winks. □



THE GIFT OF GRAB

Kelce played just 39 snaps in Week 5—and still he gobbled up eight catches for 98 yards in a 42–34 win over the Texans.



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GOLDEN
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Jerry West's
connection
to two Cali
dynasties

The first piece to fall in an offseason full of earth-shaking moves was a dominoes buff with almost as much experience waiting tables at Denny's as playing AAU ball. Now

JIMMY BUTLER

and the young Timberwolves are one of the many new-look, superstar-heavy squads hoping to make a serious run at the most loaded team of them all, the Warriors

BY LEE
JENKINS

Photograph by
Robert Beck

THE SELF-TITLED GARBAGE GUY

from small-town Texas who grew up on Spam and syrup sandwiches, who waited tables at Denny's and mowed lawns in basketball shoes, who played one game of AAU ("travel ball," he called it) and never left the bench, who received a single scholarship offer out of high school from Centenary and a partial from Quinnipiac, who started in junior college only after two regulars failed drug tests and who faxed his letter of intent to Marquette from a McDonald's sinks into a tan leather banquette on a Gulfstream III bound for Silicon Valley. Jimmy Butler is on the phone with his new head coach in Minnesota, Tom Thibodeau, who of course was also his old head coach in Chicago. They talk every day, often multiple times, about what food the Timberwolves should order for training-camp spreads and what hotel they should book in New Orleans. Butler prattles on about rush-hour traffic patterns.

But this August afternoon they are evaluating free-agent backup point guards, and Butler makes the case for a veteran he has been courting. "We spoke today," Butler says. "He's ready. He'll do everything I do. He can live in my house if he wants." The engine whirs, the plane rises, and Butler tells Thibodeau he will call back when his private flight from Los Angeles lands in San Jose. Butler is a bold-faced headliner now with 24-hour access to the coach and team president, two rented houses in the Minneapolis suburbs, dominoes engraved with JIMMY BUCKETS and practice basketballs etched with the question, CAN A KID FROM TOMBALL BE MVP? Chicago is where Butler became a two-way wing and three-time All-Star, but he felt like the Bulls still looked at him as the 30th pick in the draft, that anxious rookie who chirped from the bench, just loud enough to hear, "I can guard that dude! I can do this!" The Wolves, on the other hand, viewed him purely as the keystone of the NBA's next contender.

How Butler sees himself is more complicated. On a short stroll through downtown Palo Alto, in search of a caramel



WOLF PACK

Butler wasted little time gently (for now) imparting his wisdom to the young Wiggins.

macchiato with an extra espresso shot, strangers whisper his name as he passes. Most hoop elites are identified by no more than two syllables: LeBron. KD. Steph. Russ. Kawhi. CP. Beard. "I'm always *Jimmybutler*," he muses. The formality suits him, a superstar who used to be a sideman and still grapples with the transition. "How is a star treated?" he wonders. "I don't know. I'm learning like everyone else, and it's a helluva curve." Butler flies in a Gulfstream but drives a Toyota minivan with a BABY ON BOARD sticker across the back, even though he is single with no children. He put up 52 points in a game last season against the Hornets and 40 in a *half* the season before against the Raptors, but his preferred final score is 2-0. His favorite time of year is "grimy season," an unspecified stretch of summer and fall when he braids his hair, grows his beard and works out twice a day, hot yoga in between. "Bandannas and buckets," he crows. "That's the heart. That's the hustle."

Butler grinds in the middle of a Western conference crucible. Instead of lying down for the dominant Warriors, several clubs geared up, the Thunder pairing Russell Westbrook with





Paul George, the Rockets flanking James Harden with Chris Paul, and the Timberwolves combining Karl-Anthony Towns with Butler. While George and Paul are upcoming free agents, Butler is under contract for two years, giving the T-Wolves a rare opportunity to dent the West hierarchy.

On the eve of his introductory press conference in Minnesota, Butler stewed over reports claiming he had been a stormy presence and abrasive leader in Chicago, the kind of accusation big-market franchises traditionally leak about exiled alphas after mindless trades. "I ought to go out there tomorrow and be like, 'If you got a problem, here's my number, call me,'" Butler vented. Ifeanyi Koggu, a close friend who handles Butler's business phone, laughed nervously. "That would be funny," Koggu replied, "but not a good idea." Butler commandeered the iPhone 7 in their suite at the Loews the next morning and changed the outgoing voice-mail message from an automated greeting to a personal one. "Jimmy Butler, sorry I couldn't get to the phone, but leave your name and number and I'll hit you back. If you got any beef, definitely

leave a message." During his presser at Mall of America, in front of 2,500 hungry souls waiting on the second coming of Kevin Garnett, Butler broadcast the digits to the world.

"Everybody is entitled to their opinion," he began. "But with that being said, my phone is in my back pocket. Whoever has anything to say to me, feel free: 773-899-6071." The phone was not actually in Butler's back pocket. It was in the front pocket of Koggu's jeans. "Once he got to the last digit, I could feel my hip vibrate," Koggu recalls. "And it didn't stop." Within five minutes, the mailbox was full, and within 10, he couldn't answer a call if he tried. "There were too many coming in at the same time," Koggu explains. "Calls and texts, but also cameras popping up with Facetime requests. You could never get to the main screen." The phone became too hot to hold, so Koggu shut it down before restarting it. On a private plane to Los Angeles, Butler chatted with two fans on Facetime, including a boy who spent 45 seconds running around his house hollering for his older brother. Then the device froze for good.

After the plane landed at Van Nuys Airport, Koggu rushed to a Verizon Wireless store in Westlake Village where bewildered employees eyed the bleating gadget as if it were 1985. They reported that the phone had received more than 10,000 texts, 700 calls and 500 Facetimes in a seven-hour span. Butler was expecting a couple hundred, max. "I'm moving you up in line because we need to change your number," a manager told Koggu. "But first I have to ask, 'Why is this happening?'" Koggu thought about his funny, edgy and excitable friend who once told Derrick Rose, "Don't throw me the ball because I don't want to f--- up," and is now recognizable enough to scramble a cell simply by saying the number out loud. "Man," Koggu told the Verizon guy, "it's a long story."

THE MINIVAN sets Butler apart from the NBA's superstar class, as does the sound blaring from its speakers, a foreign twang that prompts violent convulsions among his peers. When Butler was at Marquette, he grew so weary of the hip-hop leaking from teammates' headphones that one day he blasted Tim McGraw's "Don't Take the Girl" in the locker room, mainly to annoy them. Butler was moved enough by the heart-wrenching ballad that he sampled more country music, and soon he was showing up backstage at Luke Bryan, Thomas Rhett and Florida Georgia Line concerts. "They didn't know who I was, but there aren't a lot of 6' 8" black guys at country shows," Butler says. "They damn sure couldn't forget my face, especially with this dumbass hairdo."

Butler spends his vacations in tour buses across the heartland with Bryan and FGL. He disdains Miami, New York City and Las Vegas, the NBA's natural habitats. He actually considered rejecting an invitation from the U.S. Olympic team because the squad trains in Sin City. He summers in L.A., but not really. The Spanish compound he rents in Calabasas sits over a creek and off a gravel road 45 minutes from Hollywood, out of cell reception. "I like it because it gives me an excuse,"



Butler says. “‘Oh, big party tonight, everybody’s going to be there? Sorry, I’d really love to go, but I’m all the way out here in the middle of nowhere.’” He doesn’t watch League Pass, doesn’t know his NBA2K rating and hasn’t tweeted in almost a year. He recently went 2½ months without turning on his television, which he realized only when a guest discovered that his remote control was missing its batteries.

He keeps a strict daily schedule: wake up at 6 a.m., work out at 7, turkey bacon and oatmeal with berries for breakfast at 8. Lunch is a chicken, rice and lettuce bowl from Chipotle. Before bed, Butler spends 10 minutes writing in a leather-bound journal given to him by his coach at Marquette, Buzz Williams. One entry may be trivial, about a table he spotted at Target that he might buy for his apartment in San Diego. Another is sentimental, about a mom-and-pop restaurant that served him dinner even though the kitchen was closed. (Butler invited the chef to sit with him and drink a beer.) He passes time playing touch football—although he won’t take the field unless he’s wearing a regulation NFL jersey with cleats—and dominoes, the game that taught him to count. He and his crew can flip tiles for five straight hours, trash-talking in a language only they understand. *Put that Dak on him*, a reference to the Cowboys quarterback, means somebody turned a 4. *Trees fell on him* is a 15 and must be followed by the refrain, *On his neck*.

For years Butler refused to work out alongside any pro not on his own roster, once recusing himself from a regularly scheduled session with D.J. Augustin after the point guard bolted the Bulls for the Pistons. He has relaxed his policy a bit, but his primary training partner is Mike Smith, who met Butler as a senior at Fenwick High School in Chicago during a Jordan Brand event. “I want to learn,” said Smith, whose high fade reminded Butler of his own distinctive hairstyle. Smith, now a close-cropped sophomore guard at Columbia, lives with Butler in the offseason and is often behind the wheel of the minivan. “You own a Rolls-Royce and an Escalade!” Smith gripes. “Why do we always have to take this big-ass soccer mom car and listen to Garth Brooks?”

Butler seethes in the backseat. “First of all,” he sighs, “it’s Josh Turner.”

The minivan and the baby sticker are partly aspirational. Butler yearns to start a family. “When you get to the NBA, you want the most beautiful girl you can find,” he says. “But I’m

thinking more about kids now, what they’re going to be like, and maybe she doesn’t have to be the most beautiful if she’s 5’ 11.” He and Smith have just completed their morning workout at Pepperdine, and as Butler finished firing turnaround jumpers, the women’s volleyball team trickled in for practice, their leggy presence prompting his genetic ruminations.

Butler’s own itinerant childhood has been well-chronicled: At 13, his single mother kicked him out of her home in the Houston exurb of Tomball, starting a four-year couch-surfing odyssey that ended when a friend’s family took him in. He is not interested in reliving many of the details, but he remembers all of them. Over oatmeal and bacon at Ollo, his breakfast haunt in Malibu, the sight of a silk tie reminds him of a clip-on he bought at Walmart for his sixth-grade basketball banquet. “Everybody made fun of me,” he recounts. “I was

**BULL MARKET**

Butler’s Twin Cities move reunited him with Thibs, his coach for four years in Chicago.



like, ‘At my 10-year reunion, I’m going to land a helicopter on the 50-yard-line of the f----- football field.’”

He didn’t make the reunion, let alone rent the chopper, but he did visit Mrs. Putney. She taught Butler’s first-period government class at Tomball High, and on all his homework assignments, he wrote Tracy McGrady’s name atop the paper instead of his own. Alarmed, Mrs. Putney hung a poster on the wall that cited the astronomical odds of becoming a professional athlete. “Every day I had to read it out loud in front of everybody,” Butler recalls. “One in a billion, or something close.” After Butler reached the NBA, he returned to Tomball High and discovered that Mrs. Putney had moved to the new



school in town, Tomball Memorial. When he finally found her classroom, he asked for the poster because he wanted to frame it. “She told me it was lost,” Butler says. “I think she was lying.”

Butler’s high school team was not impressive—“Me and four guys who look like you,” he tells a 5’ 9” reporter—but he still scored an invitation to join the Houston Superstars AAU program. His first game was against the Hoops, memorable only because one of the Hoops’ best players threw his shoe at a referee. Butler took a DNP in the game, but he wasn’t discouraged until afterward, when he saw his coach chatting up the shoe-tosser outside the gym. The Hoops didn’t want the kid anymore. The Superstars, wary of their new wing from Tomball, were desperate. Butler’s travel-ball career was over.

His freshman year at Tyler (Texas) Community College did not start any better. Coach Mike Marquis imposed a rule mandating that cellphones be turned off in the locker room, and during his first meeting the phone rang in Reggie Nelson’s locker, next to Butler’s. “Whose phone is it?” Marquis asked. He made both players sprint the length of the court 10 times each. *Whose phone is it?* He made them do 500 push-ups. *Whose phone is it?* Nelson never copped and Butler never squealed. Marquis was impressed, Butler shone, and a year later he was in Milwaukee swiping winter clothes from Wesley Matthews’s closet.

“HE BECAME AN OLYMPIAN AND THAT DIDN’T CHANGE HIM. HE GOT PAID AND THAT DIDN’T CHANGE HIM. I DON’T THINK YOU CAN CHANGE HIM.”

• TOM THIBODEAU

Butler was a source of curiosity at Marquette, and not just because he arrived in the upper Midwest with nothing but T-shirts and shorts. At practice, he stood off to the side of the court when he was tired, legs crossed and a hand atop his head. Williams, then the Golden Eagles’ coach, exploded at the sight of his flamingo pose. But the eruptions did not alienate Butler. To the contrary, they hooked him. He studied Williams, how the regimented coach always woke up at 4:30 a.m., used 10 colored pens to take notes, ate at Cracker Barrel on the road. A child of chaos, Butler gravitated to discipline and order. He developed his own routine, including a turkey sandwich with mustard and banana peppers

from Subway that he scarfed down every day for lunch while watching video of Marquette’s upcoming opponent. “How do I fit here?” Butler asked graduate manager Jamie McNeilly, over his foot-long sub. “How do I find a way to stick?”

He was a survivor, not a standout. At first McNeilly told him to grab two or three offensive rebounds per game, and he did that. Then, McNeilly told him to smother the other team’s best player, and he did that. Before a game against Connecticut, McNeilly asked if he wanted to check clips of Jeremy Lamb, an obvious matchup. But the Huskies’ best player was a 6’ 1” point guard, not a 6’ 5” wing. “No,” Butler replied. “Kemba Walker.”

“He gets obsessed,” McNeilly explains, “and when he’s done obsessing over one thing, he obsesses over something else.” At Marquette, Butler fixated on his three-pointer to an unhealthy extent, spewing a stream of profanity after each miss. He was so eager to see the ball drop through the net that he rushed line drives at the front of the rim. The problem, coaches concluded, was not mechanical. It was mental. In shooting games, they deducted points for every expletive to chill him out. Eventually, he regained his stroke and found other areas to fret about. During practice, he’d halt a four-man fast-break drill if he caught a ball with one hand instead of two, insisting his group start over. “What are you doing?” teammates asked. “No one even saw.” Didn’t matter. He saw.

“It was a kind of self-inflicted pain,” says McNeilly, now an assistant to Williams at Virginia Tech. “By the time Jimmy left, he was calling out mistakes just as much as Buzz. They were more than player and coach. They were like family.” Williams did not know Thibodeau personally, but he recognized the telltale signs of a kindred coaching spirit: long hours, loud voices, tough love. Before the 2011 draft, Williams contacted Bulls general manager Gar Forman and

played matchmaker. Butler and Thibs, he believed, would be family too. “With Jimmy, it won’t work if you’re proper, if you’re too tactical or technical,” Williams says. “You have to be hard-core. That’s how he learned to eat.”

THE MARRIAGE started the way so many everlasting unions do. “We couldn’t stand each other,” Butler says. It was December 2011, and Thibodeau had a lot on his mind: Derrick Rose, Joakim Noah, a lockout-condensed schedule and Miami’s Big Three. Butler, the last pick of the first round, was not a priority. At practice, Bulls assistant coach Adrian Griffin would tell Butler to make 20 corner threes



and the rookie would bristle: “Why? It won’t matter, anyway. Thibs doesn’t want me here. I’m not going to play tomorrow. I’m not going to play the game after that. I’m not going to play 10 games after that.” He was sure he’d spend the next decade in Turkey. At halftime Butler would trail Griffin to the locker room and plead, “Talk to Thibs! Tell him I’m ready!” Once, Griffin persuaded Thibodeau to put the rook in a game and call a pick-and-roll. Butler promptly turned the ball over. “See!” Thibodeau barked at Griffin. “I told you!”

In a mid-winter game against the Knicks at Madison Square Garden, starting small forward Luol Deng was injured and Chicago needed somebody to defend Carmelo Anthony. “Go guard Carmelo,” Thibodeau grumbled, and Butler assumed he should do nothing else. “If I just guard Carmelo,” he reasoned, “I can’t f--- up. So if anybody passes me the ball, I’m going to pass it right back.” On one possession, the Knicks doubled Rose, who swung the ball to Butler. He immediately returned it. In the ensuing timeout, Rose told Butler, “Yo, when I give you the ball, look to score.” Butler shook his head. “No,” he replied, “I’m only guarding Carmelo.”

Here was a rookie Thibodeau could appreciate, and a coach Butler could respect. He challenged himself to get to the team’s facility before Thibodeau.

“I pull up at 6 a.m.—‘I’m gonna beat his ass today!’—and I see that damn black Range Rover parked out front. Next morning I get there at 5:45—‘I’m *definitely* gonna beat his ass today!’—and there it is again. Then late at night I come back to shoot with Luol, and it’s still parked in that same spot. It’s like, ‘O.K., forget it, I can’t beat the guy. So I’m just gonna run through a wall for this motherf-----.’” From 2013 through ’15, Butler averaged the most minutes per game in the NBA, and he could not complain. “Hey, you asked to play,” Thibodeau reminded him at the first trace of fatigue. “So you’ll play 48 minutes.” Butler beamed.

He built an offensive arsenal with trainer Chris Johnson in grimy season, from June to October, miming the midrange mastery of Dwyane Wade and Kobe Bryant: back-to-the-basket fadeaways, one-dribble pull-ups, elbow jumpers. But at his first All-Star Game, he still pestered Chris Paul for 94 feet, lest anyone think he’d lost his blunt edge. “God made me a dog,” Butler coos. God, Thibs and Buzz, not necessarily in that order. “He became an All-Star and that didn’t change him,” Thibodeau says. “He became an Olympian and that didn’t change him. He got paid and that didn’t change him. I don’t think you can change him.”

In the spring of ’15, as Butler finally replaced Rose atop the United Center marquee, Thibodeau was fired in favor of Fred Hoiberg. Teams were trying to parrot the Warriors, with all

COWBOY WAY →

Butler often eschews convention, including his choice of headwear and his lack of a nickname.



their sunshine and rainbows. Thibodeau’s style—heavy on defense, discipline and 90-minute shootarounds—was out of fashion. “Of course I missed him,” Butler says. “I missed the way he went about things: ‘Get up on the ball screen! I told you one time and I don’t want to tell you again!’ I don’t need a coach who is going to be like, ‘Oh, Jimmy, it’s O.K.,’ after I go 0 for 10. ‘No! It’s not O.K.! And you can tell me it’s not O.K.’” He never asked the Bulls to trade him, and up until the end he expressed a desire to stay. When Thibodeau called on draft night to break news of the deal, Butler was playing spades in Paris. He braced for a two-hour conversation about Minnesota’s flimsy pick-and-roll coverage. In truth, he craved it.

“Thibs, I’m so happy to be with you again,” Butler started. “I’m training. I’m excited. I’m ready to show the world. I’m ready to motherf----- go!” Thibodeau let him rant. “O.K., Jimmy,” he said. “We’ll talk. Enjoy your time in Paris.” Butler looked dumbfounded at the phone, as if an impersonator were on the other line. *Enjoy your time in Paris.* “Hmm,” Butler thought. “That’s weird.” The next day he ate dinner at Chez l’Ami Louis, a 93-year-old bistro with a dozen tables that was recommended by Mark Wahlberg. Over escargot he broke up laughing at the ludicrousness of his working life, which started back at Denny’s in Tomball, where he quit on his first day after accidentally dousing a table of customers with a tray of drinks.

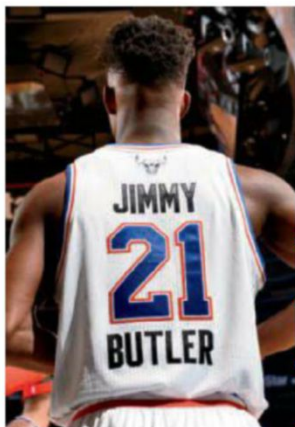
Now 28, Butler averages 23.9 points, shoots 45.5% and tours



Silicon Valley start-ups, the kind of thing modern basketball stars do. At STRIVR, where Virtual Reality helps athletes train, Butler was uncharacteristically quiet until he glimpsed VR footage of a Stanford basketball practice. “Oh, buddy, what a terrible closeout,” he groaned at a lead-footed Cardinal forward. “Thibs wouldn’t like that at all. If you’re closing out to somebody on the baseline, you never let them go middle. You have to force them down to the defender on the baseline.

If he gets middle, everybody collapses and he kicks out. At all costs, he can’t get middle!”

Andrew Wiggins, Karl-Anthony Towns and the Timberwolves can expect to hear a



“HOW IS A STAR TREATED? I DON’T KNOW. I’M LEARNING LIKE EVERYONE ELSE, AND IT’S A HELLUVA CURVE.”

● JIMMY BUTLER

similar mantra for the next six months. Butler believes Thibodeau has mellowed a bit since the Chicago days (“He’s still up and yelling, don’t get me wrong, but he’s gained this whole *human element*”) and ponders whether he can do the same. Criticism of Butler’s leadership in Chicago was poorly timed, but not unfounded. His tongue-lashings can actually be harsher than Thibodeau’s. Butler gives an example: “What are you doing right now? What is going on in your mind? Who the f--- do you think you are? If you shoot that ball again, I’m throwing it upside your head.” Butler pauses to assess his words. “O.K., that’s what I’d want to hear. But not everybody is the same, and right now, you’re probably scared of me and want to be left alone.”

Former Bulls guard Michael Carter-Williams forced Butler to reconsider his delivery during a meeting last season, when Carter-Williams suggested that encouragement could produce better results than outrage. On the Gulfstream back to Los Angeles from San Jose, Butler tests the diplomatic approach with his agent, Bernie Lee. “If I think Bernie is ugly, I can tell him, ‘Bernie, you’re the ugliest thing I’ve ever seen.’ Or I can say, ‘Bernie, did you do something different with your hair today?’” Butler is proud of his progress. Regardless, it’s probably good that the mild-mannered Wiggins and the fun-loving Towns already spent a year with Kevin Garnett howling in their eardrums.

reminds power forward Taj Gibson to catch with two hands and begs the big men to stop inbounding the ball directly under the rim. “We’re not the Warriors,” Butler explains later. “We have to do the little things. It’s 100–100, five seconds left, we’ve got possession. Our point guard is denied, he spins out, and we throw the pass off the goal. You’ve got to take it out to the side of the basket.”

He resists the temptation to share this elaborate hypothetical with the group. “I’m not going to do what I did before,” Butler vows. “I can’t be like, ‘Look, motherf---, here’s what we’re gonna do.’ I was too emotional, too confrontational.” He is perched behind the wheel of his white Rolls-Royce, braids tucked under a black mesh hat, Michael Jordan splayed across his T-shirt. He sings along with his buddy Luke Bryan—*If you wanna call me, call me, call me you don’t have to worry ’bout it baby. You can wake me up in the dead of the night; wreck my plans, baby that’s alright. This is a drop everything kind of thing*—as the GPS guides him along the Del Mar coastline to a sandwich shop, where he places his college order: turkey with mustard and banana peppers.

The Rolls gleams in the parking lot. The minivan is back in Minnesota. “I miss it,” Butler says. “Unfortunately, we have to use this thing just a little longer.” He shrugs with the slightest hint of irony.

Grimy season never ends. □



BIG LITTLE MAN

*He won't be on the floor when the season starts, but **Cleveland's new 5' 9" high-scoring, hard-grinding point guard Isaiah Thomas** will loom large over the season as he tries to return in time to push the Cavs past the Warriors—and prove to the Celtics that giving up on him was a mistake*



→ **BY
LEE JENKINS**

Photograph by
Michael J. Le Brecht II/
NBAE/Getty Images

SHOOTING STAR

The Cavs have only had one player—guess which one—with a higher scoring average than Thomas's 28.9 points per game clip last season.

A GREEN-AND-GRAY mini basketball sits on a bed of sand-colored rocks next to the pool in the backyard. The ball belongs to five-year-old Jaiden Thomas, son of Isaiah Thomas, whose name and image grace the side of it. Jaiden brought the ball from Boston to Cleveland, a reminder that his father used to play for the Celtics and played so well they sold souvenirs with his picture on them. Jaiden's family does not have a hoop at their new home in Westlake, Ohio, a two-story brick traditional with a circular driveway framed by oak trees. So if they want to shoot, they cross the quiet street to the Strong residence. "Excuse me," Isaiah said, when he first knocked on the Strong's front door one overcast afternoon in late September. "Can we use your hoop?"

Joyce Strong laughed because nobody had put a ball through that rusted rim since her daughter, Terry, moved out a couple decades ago. And she apologized because at some point a snow plow rammed the black stanchion, knocking the basket slightly off-center. "That sounds perfect," Isaiah replied. As he and Jaiden fired jumpers from the Strong's cement slab, Joyce and her husband took stock of their affable new neighbors. "I think that's the point guard the Cavs just got," Tom said, looking for the local newspaper to provide confirmation. "I don't know," Joyce responded. "Isn't he too small?"

For six years NBA officials asked the same question, until last season, when Thomas provided a definitive answer. No, he is not too small, and yes, the Kings were foolish to bench him and the Suns senseless to trade him and others irresponsible to overlook him. At 5' 9", Thomas averaged the most points in the Eastern Conference, putting up totals Kyrie Irving would envy: 41 against Detroit and Portland, 44 against Toronto and Memphis, 52 against Miami and

53 against Washington. The Wizards outburst came in the second round of the playoffs, six weeks after Thomas injured his hip at TD Garden, when he attempted a layup over four Timberwolves and 7-foot center Karl-Anthony Towns crashed down on top of him. But the Celtics were scrapping for the No. 1 seed in the East. Thomas wanted to play. Then his 22-year-old sister, Chyna, died in a car accident on April 15, the day before Game 1 of the first round. Thomas needed to play.

"Hoop is what lets me forget about everything else," Thomas says. "The court was the only place I felt comfortable. At home, I'd just sit around and think about my sister, which hurt. On the floor, I was free. Emotionally, I wasn't even there." Cortisone provided anesthetic for the hip, basketball for the heart. Numb all over, Thomas kept fighting around triple teams and hurtling through 7-footers until the East finals, when he couldn't push off his right foot or cross over anybody.

So much intrigue has unfolded since: interminable doctor's appointments, physical-therapy sessions, MRIs. Thomas was traded from Boston to Cleveland, and then he wasn't, and then he was. His hip became the most scrutinized body part since Donald Trump's hands. At his house in the Seattle woods, he tried to mourn his sister's death with family and friends, but peace was elusive. For the first time, it seemed, no one questioned his height and everyone his health.

Thomas won't play on opening night against the Celtics and there's a chance he won't even play on Christmas Day against the Warriors, but his presence will loom over this entire NBA season, casting a shadow longer than his frame. If Thomas comes back at full strength from a torn labrum in his right hip—and the date doesn't really matter, as long as it's before April—the Cavaliers will be deeper and tougher than ever, a lock for the Finals and a threat to the Warriors. But if Thomas returns a lesser version of himself, the Celtics have a chance and the Dubs a repeat. "Something crazy is going to happen again," Thomas says, "because that's how it always goes with me."

The Trade—Irving to the Celtics; Thomas, Jae Crowder, Ante Zizic, the Nets' first-round pick next year and the Heat's second-round pick in 2020 to the Cavs—was preposterous enough, on multiple levels. For one thing, players don't ask to leave LeBron James, as Irving did. For another, conference rivals don't swap franchise point guards, especially when one of those floor generals is a happy and loved 28-year-old who played through injury and grief while recruiting landmark free agents in successive summers. "None of it made any sense," Thomas says. "It still doesn't make any sense. I'm still asking, 'What the hell happened?' It's a trade you make in *NBA2K*. It's not a trade you make in real life."

Four days after the deal was first agreed upon, Thomas flew to Las Vegas for the Floyd Mayweather–Conor McGregor bout. Thomas has been close to Mayweather since 2011, when they met at a training session in Vegas and went to a Robin Thicke concert. Thomas sat in Mayweather's locker room at T-Mobile

Arena as trainers wrapped the champ's hands for McGregor. "What the hell is going on?" Mayweather asked. Thomas had just completed a physical, a formality to finalize the trade, but Cavaliers doctors came away concerned Thomas would miss more time than originally anticipated. Mayweather used his final minutes of fight prep to query his friend.

"I left Cleveland, everybody was excited, everybody was on board," Thomas explains. "Then I get off the plane in Vegas and there are all these stories about my hip. People were looking at me like I had one leg." His 2017, which started with so much promise, was ending with so much pain. "Best



FAMILIAR FACES

In Cleveland, Thomas will join Love (above), an old AAU teammate from his Seattle days, and—no doubt to the delight of his son—King James (right).

year of my career," Thomas says, "worst year of my life." At the fight, he sat a row in front of Warriors forward Draymond Green, two second-round picks made good. From Green's perspective, the uncertainty surrounding Thomas was not strange. It was standard. "This," he said, "is your story."

IN FEBRUARY 2012, as a rookie drafted 60th overall, Thomas was the Kings' starting point guard. "That summer," he begins, "they brought in Aaron Brooks." He won back the job by January. "That summer, they traded for Greivis Vasquez." He regained his spot by December. "That summer, they didn't even offer me a contract." Five teams expressed interest in Thomas, who had averaged 20.3 points and 6.3 assists in his third season with the Kings, but he signed with the first one he visited. Even though Phoenix already employed point guards Goran Dragić and Eric Bledsoe, Thomas



“BOSTON IS GOING TO BE ALL LOVE,” HE SAYS, WITH ONE EXCEPTION. “I MAY NEVER TALK TO DANNY [AINGE] AGAIN.”

ISAIAH THOMAS

felt wanted, a foreign sensation. “I should have waited,” he admits. “I fell into it.” Seven months later, the Suns sent him to Boston at the trade deadline, 10 minutes after they shipped Dragić to Miami. “Boston?” Thomas said to himself when he heard the news on the team bus. “Not Boston.”

The Celtics were rebuilding, but Thomas expedited the project. Not only did he become a back-to-back All-Star, one year he wooed free agent Al Horford on a trip to Atlanta and the next he lured Gordon Hayward over a dinner in Boston. “We made the Celtics cool again,” Thomas says. His older son, James, advised him as recently as July: “You should play with LeBron. You should sign with Cleveland.”

“Stop that,” Thomas hushed. “We’re trying to *beat* Cleveland!” When Thomas scored 53 points against Washington, he took a moment at the free throw line to savor the Garden’s MVP chants. “Damn,” he thought, “this is everything I wanted.”

It lasted 10 days. In Game 6, the Wizards leveled him with a sledgehammer screen and his right leg throbbled. Effects of the preplayoff cortisone shot had waned. “I never felt pain like that,” Thomas winces. After an agonizing flight home to Boston, he put up 29 and 12 in a Game 7 triumph to the amazement of Celtics doctors. “I don’t know how you’re doing this,” one marveled. The stakes were too high to sit. Perhaps they were also too high to play.

Five months have passed and Thomas rises from his kitchen table to stretch his right hip. “No doubt about it, I should have sat out the playoffs,” he says. “No way around it, I made it worse.” After Game 2 of the East finals, the Celtics shut down Thomas, and he braced for surgery. “I thought I’d get it done in a couple days and start rehab,” he recounts. Thomas went to New York City for an appointment with Bryan Kelly, a leading orthopedic surgeon at the Hospital for Special Surgery



and an expert in hip preservation. According to Thomas, Kelly prescribed rest rather than surgery and asked him to return for another MRI in six weeks, when inflammation diminished. Thomas, a regular at Seattle's renowned pick-up runs, wasn't even allowed to shoot with Jamal Crawford.

On July 18, Thomas underwent another MRI in New York, attended by Celtics general manager Danny Ainge and team officials. Thomas wasn't recovering as quickly as he'd hoped, but he left New York encouraged. "It was a good appointment," he recalls. "Dr. Kelly told me I should continue to rest it." The Celtics dispatched a physical therapist to Seattle to work with Thomas twice a day in August. He knew Irving wanted out of Cleveland. He had no warning he might be involved.

Sacramento and Phoenix, Aaron Brooks and Eric Bledsoe, provided an early education in the business of basketball. But they could not prepare Thomas for Aug. 22. He has wracked his brain for reasons the Celtics moved him, having been assured performance and personality were not among them. Ainge acknowledged that Thomas's health played a role, as did his contract. By any normal measure, Thomas is richly compensated at \$6.2 million this year, but in the NBA he is a dime-store steal who finally reaches free agency next summer. The irony, of course, is that Thomas jeopardized both health and earning potential while playing hurt for the Celtics.

"I've been looking at this wall for five hours," Celtics coach Brad Stevens texted Thomas after the trade, "trying to figure out what to say to you." When Sacramento let Thomas walk in 2014, he left town telling himself, "F--- Sacramento. I'm about to kill those dudes." When Phoenix exiled him the following winter, he pledged, "O.K., now they're gonna get it." But there will be no revenge tour this time. "Boston is going to be all love," he vows, with one exception. "I might not ever talk to Danny again. That might not happen. I'll talk to everybody else. But what he did, knowing everything I went through, you don't do that, bro. That's not right. I'm not saying eff you. But every team in this situation comes out a year or two later and says, 'We made a mistake.' That's what they'll say, too."

THE TRADE sat in transactional purgatory for a week as the Cavs investigated Thomas's hip. They knew he would miss games. They needed to gauge how many. Meanwhile, reports circulated with outside doctors drawing foreboding comparisons with other cases. "They hadn't even seen one of my MRIs, and they were acting like I was damaged, like this might ruin my career," Thomas says. "I'm not damaged, I'm just injured. But mentally it messed with me. You don't know what the Celtics are saying to save their ass or what the Cavs are saying for leverage." Thomas called Kelly and asked, "Am I missing something? Is there something I should know?" The doctor tried to calm him, citing other patients with more severe conditions who returned to all-NBA levels.

The Cavaliers squeezed another pick out of the Celtics, the



2020 second-rounder, an attempt to mitigate some risk. They wanted to bet on Thomas, but they couldn't be sure when he will heal or how he will perform. In truth, they still can't. They are far more optimistic, though, than when they first acquired him. Thomas is working out six days a week, running on an AlterG antigravity treadmill and doing defensive slides in the pool. When the Cavs practice, he lifts, and when they lift, he hits the court. He drains one-dribble pull-up jumpers. Shuttlng side-to-side remains a challenge. According to Thomas, the inflammation and bone bruise in his hip are actually more restrictive than the torn labrum, which some athletes are able to endure without much hindrance.

From New York, Kelly confers with Cavaliers doctors about treatment plans and rehab schedules. Thomas wants to beat the organization's timetable, late December or early January, and his wife recently caught him sleeping with a basketball at night. But he can't apply the pressure on



himself that he did before. He wears a pair of sandals with SLOW printed over his left foot, GRIND over his right. The sandals are purple, the color of his Washington Huskies, one team that couldn't trade him.

"The nice thing about the Cavs is nobody is in a rush," Thomas says. "Most places are trying to get you back, which isn't always best for you. These guys know they're going to play in June. It's a given." When Thomas went from Phoenix to Boston two years ago, he got a call from his namesake, who informed him he'd been upgraded. When he went from Boston to Cleveland, Isaiah Thomas rang again, with a similar message: "Every time you fall down, you always get up, and the situation is better than you thought it would be."

He may need a few more conversations to be convinced. "I felt like I was building my own thing in Boston and we were close," Thomas laments. "We were so close! Dang! That's what hurts. We went from the lottery to the conference finals. We just got Hayward. We were right there. Think of all the national TV games we were about to have." He slaps his side. But he also recognizes that his son James, the LeBron fan, had legitimate reasons for pushing Cleveland. "I get to be with the

not a question for me. It's only a question for everybody else."

Thomas always believed the Celtics matched up better with Golden State than they did Cleveland, but Eastern bedrocks have shifted and identities have changed. The C's are more skilled than they used to be, the Cavs more defiant. "Boston is going to be good," Thomas predicts. "They've got really good players and a great coach. But it takes more than talent. They lost a lot of heart and soul." Thomas is limited on defense, but the same goes for Irving. Crowder helps cover gaps, a sticky wing the Cavs could have used on Kevin Durant last June, allowing LeBron to roam.

Celtics coaches still text Thomas, checking on him. The first couple of weeks in Cleveland were awkward, when the family was staying at The 9 hotel downtown, in the midst of the Indians' 22-game winning streak. Jaiden was starting kindergarten and fireworks kept exploding outside his window after bedtime. "Is it always like this?" wondered Thomas's wife, Kayla. But by mid-September they were ensconced in tranquil Westlake, neighbors dropping off cupcakes and Kayla reciprocating with candles. Jaiden, who spent the past two years in a Cambridge apartment, scooted around the neighborhood with

TEAMMATE WAP

Before taking his place as Cleveland's point guard, a hobbled Thomas struggled to check Irving during the first two games of the 2017 conference finals (below), which were both won handily by the Cavaliers.

"NO DOUBT ABOUT IT, I SHOULD HAVE SAT OUT THE PLAYOFFS. NO WAY AROUND IT, I MADE IT WORSE."

ISAIAH THOMAS

best player in the world now," Thomas says. "I'll only have one guy on me. All the double and triple teams will be on 23."

BEFORE TRAINING CAMP, the Cavaliers convened in Santa Barbara and Thomas reminisced with Kevin Love about their old AAU squad in Portland, United Salad. "Horrible name," Thomas cracks, "great team." Love, who used to host Thomas for pregame sleepovers, told his friend in so many words that the salad days are here again. Cavs coach Tyronn Lue is already drawing up sets for Thomas and Love, Thomas and LeBron. Isaiah visualizes Oracle Arena, a Finals MVP trophy in his arms and a max contract on the way. Men who are 5' 9" don't make the NBA without king-sized confidence. "I just gotta get healthy and show the world again," Thomas says. "That's

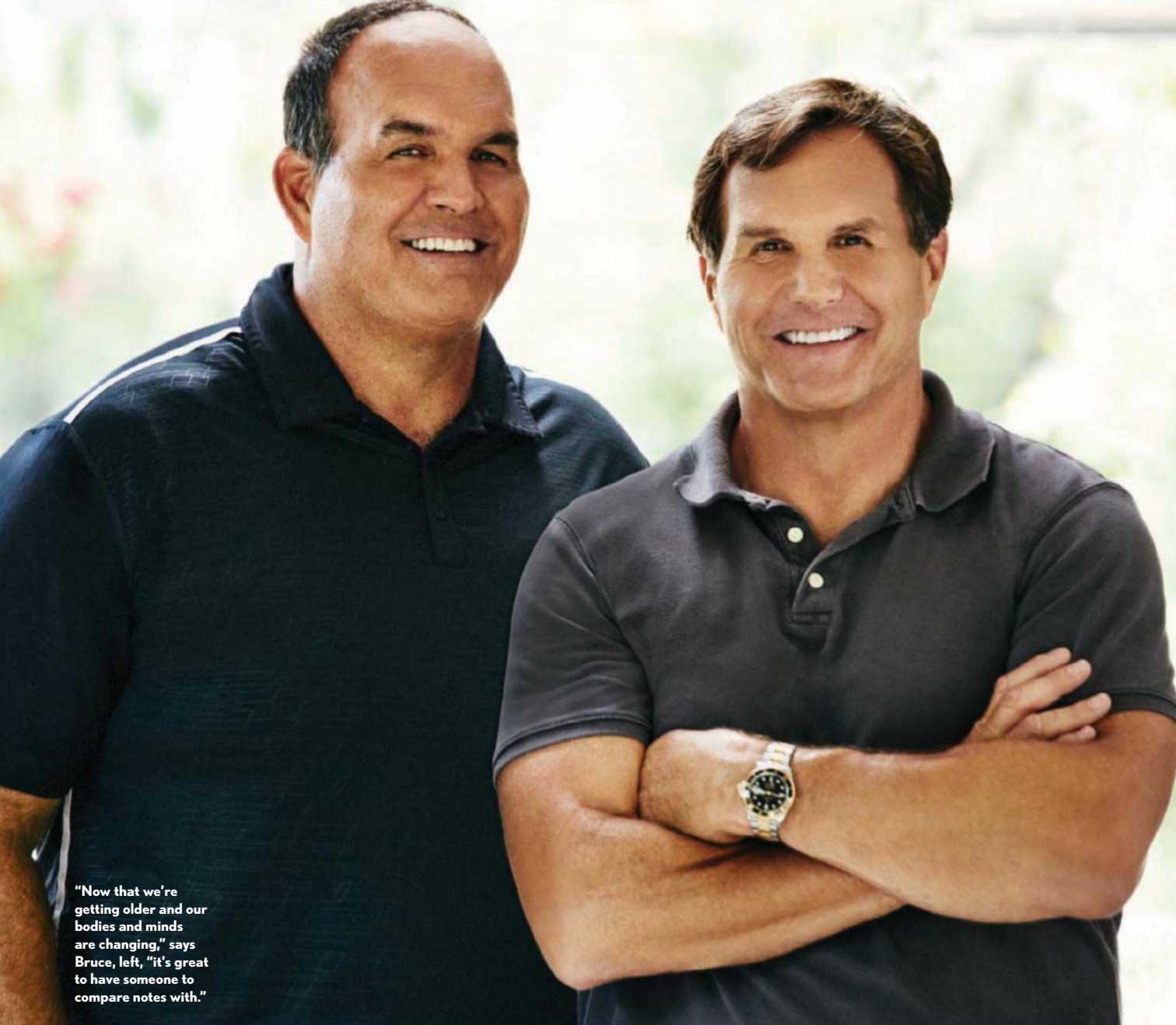


new friends he called his bros. "If they're happy," Thomas says, "I'm happy."

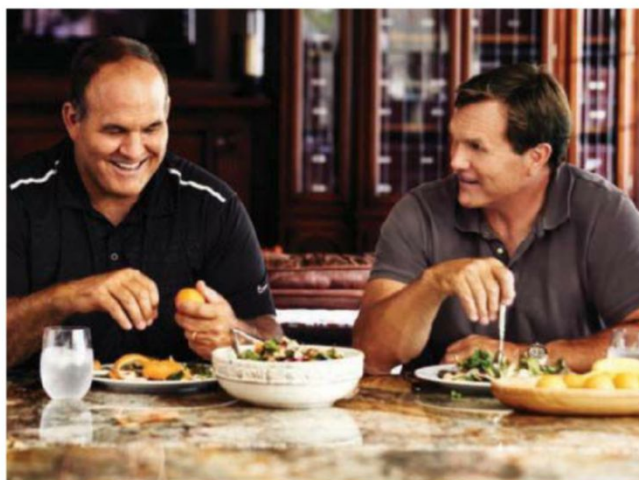
Make no mistake, however, the Thomases are renting. "We were about to buy a place in Boston," Isaiah laughs. "We won't ever do that again." He is understandably wary of NBA politics and power brokers. But he trusts Dr. Kelly—even though he has asked

a half-dozen times if he should have undergone the operation—and Aaron Goodwin, the agent who is advising him. If Thomas does not fully recover, he can always get the surgery as a last resort. "My career is a fight," Thomas says. "I'm not a regular superstar where whatever happens, it's all right. Every day is a fight. I need people who understand that fight." Basketball's smallest heavyweight pauses to consider where his bout stands.

"Oh, we're only in the middle rounds," he declares. "I'm playing till I'm 40." □



"Now that we're getting older and our bodies and minds are changing," says Bruce, left, "it's great to have someone to compare notes with."



"We help each other make healthy choices because we know it's key to staying sharp," says Bruce, left.

"The social aspects of a pickup game take your mind off how hard you're working," says Clay, right.



REAL SHARP

WITH THE MATTHEWS BROTHERS

Former pro football players Clay and Bruce Matthews have formed a new team all of their own, leaning on each other to add mental fitness to their routine.



f all the motivational sayings that Bruce Matthews heard during his remarkable 19-season-long professional football career, one stands out in particular: “The future is now.”

Guided by this mantra, Bruce and his brother Clay Matthews Jr. (who notably also played 19 seasons) are committed to keeping their heads in the game of life and adapting to the changes that come with age.

Although the brothers are known for their years on the gridiron, they consider mental fitness just as important as physical fitness. Clay has replaced tackling opponents on the football field with tackling a great book, and Bruce loves a good crossword puzzle. “I find as my vocabulary has continued to grow, I’ve become a little smarter. I even like the numerical problems in the paper,” says Clay, who looks for easy ways to challenge his brain every day.

They’ve also re-imagined their post-football nutrition routine. “I used to look at it like the fire inside me burned so hot, you could throw any kind

of fuel in there,” says Clay. “Over time, the fire doesn’t burn as hot and if you throw bad fuel in there, it can snuff everything out.” Bruce agrees: “I can really feel the difference when I eat well.” It’s more important than ever for the two to encourage each other to stay on top of their nutrition.

Hitting the gym has also taken on new meaning for the duo. “It used to be that we worked out to get stronger and faster on the field,” says Clay, “but now, the goal is to be the best versions of ourselves physically *and* mentally speaking.” But that doesn’t mean it’s always easy. “Sometimes it’s hard to find the motivation to work out,” admits Bruce, “but then I’m always so relaxed and clear-headed afterwards.”

None of these changes would be possible without the support of their larger team: their family and friends. From staying in touch with the pro football world through their two sons (shown above) to having friends who provide a sense of camaraderie, “relationships are so important,” says Bruce. “A sense of wanting to be the best in my role as a father, grandfather, and friend keeps me motivated.” Clay, too, considers his bonds with others a key investment in his holistic health: “I realize now as I get older how important it is to be around people. We’re all in this together.”



LIKE FATHER, LIKE SON: Clay (left) and Bruce (right) with their pro-football-player sons, Clay Matthews III and Jake Matthews.

BETTER BRAIN HEALTH

Improving and maintaining brain health requires a holistic approach. AARP’s Staying Sharp provides tools and information across the five pillars of brain health.

1. MOVE Gain access to information and tips to help you stay active.

2. DISCOVER Flex your mental muscles with online brain exercises.

3. RELAX Learn how to let your mind relax and recharge.

4. NOURISH Find out about the best nutrients to fuel your brain.

5. CONNECT See how interacting with friends, family, and the community can positively affect brain health.



For more resources to keep you sharp, go to aarp.org/possibilities



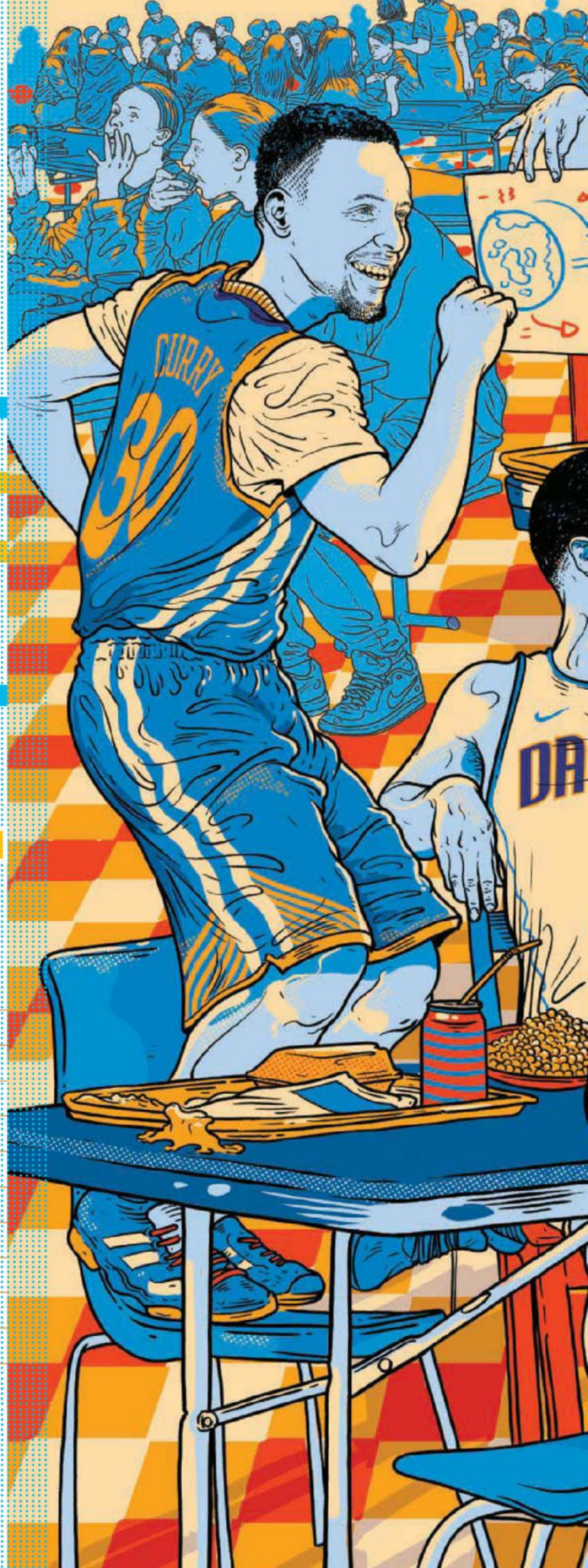
PICK 'N' HIGH SCHOOL ROLL

BY STEVE
RUSHIN

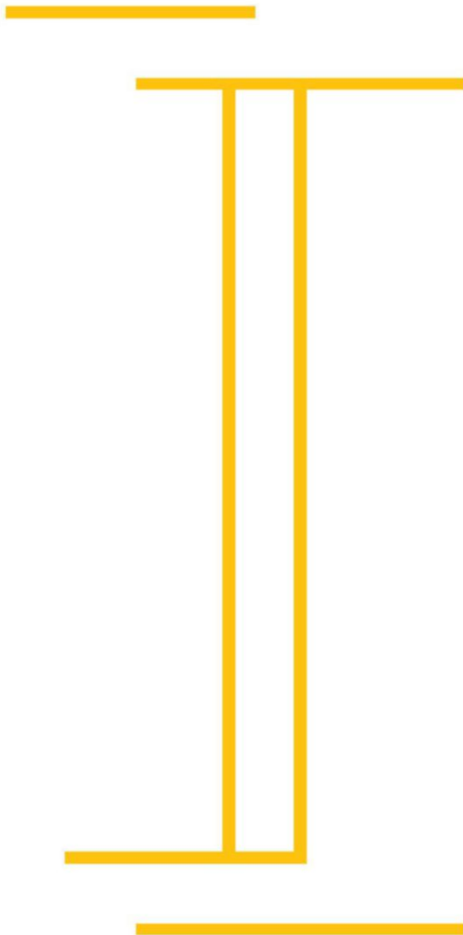
Illustrations by
TIM MCDONAGH



The ho-hum playoffs didn't provide much excitement, but the NBA made up for it with an offseason straight out of Mean Girls. It had everything: competing cliques, passive-aggressive Instagramming and baking-related disses. So before we tip off the 2017-18 season, let us appreciate one last time the Summer of Subtweeting







IF "HOLLYWOOD is high school with money," in the famous assertion of actor Martin Mull, then the NBA is even-higher school: high school with height (and, of course, money). Everyone's too tall to be stuffed in a locker, the couture backpacks are too tiny to hold books, and the hair buns aren't just for the lunch ladies. But the league is still unmistakably high school, with its cliques, feuds and frenemies, all of it amplified on Instagram.

And so the student body returns this month to what we might call, with apologies to the Ramones, Pick-and-Roll High School. The kids can look back on a long Summer of Subtweeting, of public passive-aggression on social media, of epic breakups and intensifying BFFs. The NBA offseason is now nearly as entertaining as the NBA onseason. Anyone in the halls asking "How was your summer?" is in for an earful.

Did you hear, for instance, that just after All-Star forward Gordon Hayward left the Jazz to sign with the Celtics, one of his jilted teammates in Utah, Rudy Gobert, posted video of himself on Instagram nodding along to "Loyal" by Chris Brown (of all people)? The song laments the lack of, shall we say, fidelity in a relationship. Gobert never mentioned

Hayward by name, but he didn't have to. At 7' 1", with a 7' 9" wingspan, Gobert can throw shade simply by standing in the sun—though in this case he was sitting in a car, presumably while doing donuts in the student parking lot.

Meanwhile, the homecoming King, LeBron James, was down in the weight room, posting his own workout video, getting swole and dancing to a Meek Mill track. Shortly after Stephen Curry appeared in another viral video, this one shot in the waning hours of the wedding reception for former teammate Harrison Barnes. Toasts completed, ties abandoned, dance floor teeming, Curry impersonated and gently mocked LeBron's moves while other wedding guests looked on in delight. Curry's Warriors had just defeated LeBron's Cavs in the Finals, and so the wedding was also a kind of NBA senior prom, whose theme—given the presence of Kyrie Irving, James's soon-to-be-ex-teammate in Cleveland—might have been: Disenchantment Under the Sea.

Except that Irving is now happily ensconced in Boston, a Flat-Earther plying his trade in what Oliver Wendell Holmes called "the hub of the solar system." (The science teacher would like to see both men after class.) Intriguingly, Irving is now paired in the Hub with Gobert's ex, the wayward Gordon Hayward.

SCHOOL DAZE →

Gobert (below) and Embiid (far right) are social media stars, while Joakim Noah led the hair bun movement.





WE SHOULD say, in light of our school's social media and bullying policies, that almost all of this is in good fun. On important matters, players are publicly supportive of one another for the most part, as when LeBron tweeted his solidarity with Steph after Donald Trump withdrew a White House invitation that the Dubs were disinclined to accept in the first place.

As in other high schools, everyone has returned in the fall with new kicks. Kevin Durant comes back in the latest iteration of his signature shoe, the KDX, which feature a "red velvet" color scheme on the uppers and cream-frosting soles. As the Nike press kit proclaimed, "At the end of the day, winning is all that matters, and anything else is just icing on the cake." It sounds like the banal quotation on a senior's yearbook page but is in fact a reference—like the shoes themselves—to KD's long-running beef with his former Thunder teammate, Russell Westbrook, who once called Durant a cupcake.

Or seemed to. Left to their own mobile devices, players never address anyone directly by name. You'll recall that Westbrook, the 2017 MVP, Instagrammed a photo of a three-tiered tower of cupcakes on the Fourth of July in '16, when Durant left Russ for the Warriors—*cupcake* being Oklahoma City locker room slang for a soft player. Durant won a title in his first season with Golden State, and was even named MVP of the Finals, after which he wore a custom-made cupcake hat to teammate JaVale McGee's celebrity softball game. The cherry on top of the cupcake had been replaced by a golden ring. (Oh no he didn't, you might say, but—O-M-Double-G—in fact he did.)

And that wasn't even the end of the summer's Cupcake Wars. To a Twitter user who asked him why he left OKC, Durant replied in the third person that he didn't like coach Billy Donovan, the Thunder organization or the team's lack of depth. This tweet was sent from Durant's official Twitter account, but evidently was meant to be sent from an anonymous "burner account," one Durant presumably uses to defend himself on social media.

To his credit, KD quickly and sincerely apologized, saying he felt terrible about the tweets. But that did not stop Joel Embiid, the Sixers' star and joyful Twitter troll, from posting in the third person, as if making a similar mistake: "JOEL EMBIID IS BETTER THAN MJ EVER WAS. #FACTS#BurnerTwitter".

Elsewhere, All-Star shooting guard Jimmy Butler was not referring to a Jason Bourne-like burner phone when he gave his cell number to fans and haters alike in a live



DURANT WORE A CUSTOM- MADE CUPCAKE HAT—WITH THE CHERRY ON TOP REPLACED BY A GOLDEN RING.

press conference to tout his arrival with the Timberwolves from the Bulls. So hit him up, students, if anything is going on this Friday night, lest Butler suffer the FOMO that is so pervasive at Pick-and-Roll High, where cliques are forming and reforming every day. Ask LeBron, joined now in Cleveland by BFFs old (Dwyane Wade) and new (Isaiah Thomas).

Will all this drama play out face-to-face now, or fade into the ether? We'll find out as the lunchroom is cleared of the cafeteria tables, revealing—at last—the gym floor, which is once again ready for its primary purpose: basketball. □



DUB STEPS

After winning his first title last year, Kevin Durant (with ball) will find himself headed back to the Finals to face a familiar foe.

Photograph by
Greg Nelson

SCOUTING

→ What's new in the NBA this year? Plenty: CP3 in Clutch City. PG13 in OKC. Lonzo in L.A. Hayward in the Hub. What's not new? How things will turn out: **The Warriors and the Cavaliers will meet in the Finals for the fourth year in a row.** And the Dubs will win again, proving that the more things change, the more they, in fact, stay the same

REPO





**TELLING
STATISTICS BY
ROHAN NADKARNI
(EASTERN
CONFERENCE)
AND ANDREW
SHARP (WESTERN
CONFERENCE)**

55
SPORTS
ILLUSTRATED
OCTOBER 16,
2017

EASTERN PROJECTIONS

- 1 **CAVALIERS**
- 2 **CELTICS**
- 3 **WIZARDS**
- 4 **RAPTORS**
- 5 **BUCKS**
- 6 **HORNETS**
- 7 **HEAT**
- 8 **PISTONS**
- 9 **76ERS**
- 10 **KNICKS**
- 11 **PACERS**
- 12 **HAWKS**
- 13 **MAGIC**
- 14 **NETS**
- 15 **BULLS**

Conference
Finals

**CAVALIERS
over
CELTICS**



WESTERN PROJECTIONS

- 1 **WARRIORS**
- 2 **ROCKETS**
- 3 **SPURS**
- 4 **THUNDER**
- 5 **TIMBERWOLVES**
- 6 **TRAIL BLAZERS**
- 7 **CLIPPERS**
- 8 **JAZZ**
- 9 **NUGGETS**
- 10 **GRIZZLIES**
- 11 **PELICANS**
- 12 **MAVERICKS**
- 13 **LAKERS**
- 14 **KINGS**
- 15 **SUNS**

Conference
Finals

**WARRIORS
over
ROCKETS**



➔ **NBA FINALS**
WARRIORS over **CAVALIERS**

DAVID E. KLUTHO (DWAYNE WADE);
JOHN W. McDONOUGH (DRAYMOND GREEN);
ANDREW D. BERNSTEIN/NBAE/GETTY IMAGES (TROPHY)





PROJECTED LINEUP 2016-17 STATS

COACH TYRONN LUE
(3rd season with Cavaliers)

2016-17 RECORD 51-31
(1st in Central)

PG ISAIAH THOMAS* (I)
28.9 PPG; 5.9 APG; 46.3 FG%; 37.9 3FG%

SG DWYANE WADE*
18.3 PPG; 4.5 RPG; 43.4 FG%; 31.0 3FG%

SF LEBRON JAMES
26.4 PPG; 8.6 RPG; 8.7 APG; 54.8 FG% →

PF JAE CROWDER*
13.9 PPG; 5.8 RPG; 46.3 FG%; 39.8 FG%

C KEVIN LOVE
19.0 PPG; 11.1 RPG; 42.7 FG%; 37.3 3FG%

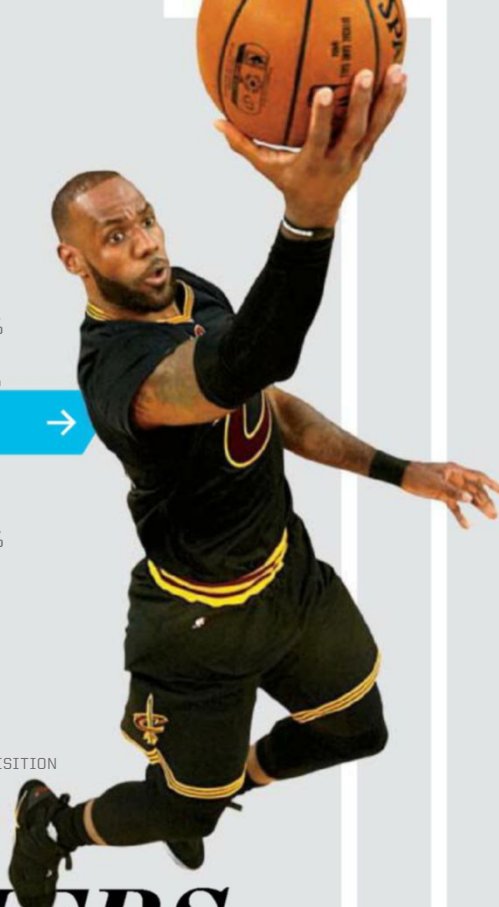
BENCH

SG J.R. SMITH
8.6 PPG; 1.5 APG; 34.6 FG%; 35.1 3FG%

PF TRISTAN THOMPSON
8.1 PPG; 9.2 RPG; 1.1 BPG; 60.0 FG%

PG DERRICK ROSE*
18.0 PPG; 4.4 APG; 0.7 SPG; 47.1 FG%

● THE CROSSOVER TOP 100 RANKING *NEW ACQUISITION
(I) INJURED TO START SEASON



ENEMY LINES

A RIVAL SCOUT SIZES
UP CLEVELAND

LEBRON JAMES is such a physical marvel. I think as he ages, he's going to be more capable of playing different positions, whether it's as a ballhandling four or a point guard, so he can operate between the free throw lines. There are so many ways you can use him even when he starts to lose a step. . . . **ISAIAH THOMAS** can really help them [when he recovers from his hip injury]. He's infinitely tough, willing to take big shots, but he gets a little exposed in the playoffs because of game-planning and his size. . . . **KEVIN LOVE**'s year was one of the more underappreciated things last season. The guy was superefficient and as good as he can possibly be defensively. It's huge having a weapon who can shoot, doesn't need post ups and is comfortable playing off LeBron. . . . Even if **TRISTAN THOMPSON** wasn't playing with LeBron, he'd be successful. He had a terrible Finals—there's no avoiding it—but his spirit is so strong, he's a warrior and has completely accepted his role coming out of college: as a tough pick-and-roll guy who gets everything he can off the offensive glass. . . . I've heard a narrative that **JAE CROWDER** wasn't good defensively last year, but the guy's what every team is looking for and on an unbelievable contract [\$6.8 million this year]. Now LeBron won't have to guard, say, Kevin Durant in the Finals. If LeBron stays, Crowder's still valuable, and if he leaves, he's a real trade chip. . . . Because he's accepted that he's a defensive player and three-point shooter, **J.R. SMITH** is a very valuable guy too. They really have a lot of toughness and shooting on the roster.

EASTERN CONFERENCE

CAVALIERS

TELLING

111.1

STATISTIC

After a crazy offseason, the Cavaliers remain the favorites to win the East, which is good. That puts them on a path toward a fourth straight Finals meeting with the Warriors, which is bad. When it comes to that matchup,

Cleveland is still lacking in one extremely important area: defense. The Cavs' **defensive rating after the All-Star break was 111.1, the second-worst mark in the NBA** during that stretch. And the D has only gotten

worse. Kyrie Irving was a weak link, but he's still better than his replacement, Isaiah Thomas, who ranked dead last among point guards in defensive plus-minus last season. Meanwhile, veteran pickups Derrick Rose and Dwyane Wade, each of whom will likely see considerable playing time, have been spotty at best and awful at worst over the

last few years.

The bench offers some help, thanks to wings Iman Shumpert and J.R. Smith. But besides LeBron James, only 6' 6" newcomer Jae Crowder—a long power forward who is one of the game's most versatile defenders—qualifies as a stopper. Even when Tyronn Lue puts out his best defensive lineup, expect some gaping holes.

BOTTOM LINE | LeBron alone makes Cleveland's fourth straight trip to the Finals likely, but he still doesn't have the help to unseat the champs.

PROJECTED LINEUP 2016-17 STATS

COACH BRAD STEVENS
(5th season with Celtics)

2016-17 RECORD 53-29
(1st in Atlantic)

PG KYRIE IRVING*
25.2 PPG; 5.8 APG; 47.3 FG%; 40.1 3FG%

SG MARCUS SMART
10.6 PPG; 4.6 APG; 35.9 FG%; 28.3 3FG%

SF GORDON HAYWARD*
21.9 PPG; 5.4 RPG; 3.5 APG; 47.1 FG%

PF MARCUS MORRIS*
14.0 PPG; 4.6 RPG; 41.8 FG%; 33.1 3FG%

C AL HORFORD
14.0 PPG; 6.8 RPG; 5.0 APG; 47.3 FG%

BENCH

SG JAYLEN BROWN
6.6 PPG; 2.8 RPG; 45.4 FG%; 34.1 3FG%

SF JAYSON TATUM (R)
16.8 PPG; 7.3 RPG; 45.2 FG%; 34.2 3FG%

PG TERRY ROZIER
5.5 PPG; 1.8 APG; 36.7 FG%; 31.8 3FG%

● THE CROSSOVER TOP 100 RANKING *NEW ACQUISITION
(R) ROOKIE, COLLEGE STATS

ENEMY LINES

A RIVAL SCOUT SIZES
UP BOSTON

Just to see how the team jells and reacts is going to be interesting because they traded the majority of their identity: Avery Bradley, Isaiah Thomas, Jae Crowder. Some of the personalities they've added aren't known for their leadership qualities. . . . They're expecting **MARCUS SMART** and **JAYLEN BROWN** to replace what they lost. That's gonna be tough. It looks like Smart is going to start at two guard to begin the season, and that's the protection component for **KYRIE IRVING**. [Smart] will just defend the more difficult matchup. **TERRY ROZIER** is so talented, he's going to start wanting to be out there in key moments to prove himself. . . . Brown has the talent to star on the defensive end; he can guard up a position, he can guard down. If they close games with him and **GORDON HAYWARD** and **AL HORFORD** together, that's a switch at every position. . . . **JAYSON TATUM** and Kyrie are isolation scorers; their value comes out more in the playoffs. Kyrie has the opportunity to shine and carry a heavy load, but he's not going somewhere devoid of talent, which would have been difficult. He just has to keep doing what he's been doing. . . . Hayward is now basically the point guard, while Kyrie is the two guard. Hayward's stats could have an uptick because they played so slow in Utah. He's an underrated guy because of all he can do: He can play the four, handle the ball, shoot, score, and he's one of the better passers at his position. He's not the guy who carries the franchise, but with their young core, you just need a group that has versatility. And that's what they have.

EASTERN CONFERENCE

CELTICS

TELLING

4

STATISTIC

After finishing No. 1 in the East and making it to the conference finals last season, **Boston has only four returning players.**

The Celtics' seismic moves this offseason, which yielded Gordon Hayward and

Kyrie Irving, made the roster more star-studded. But they came at the expense of much of coach Brad Stevens's depth.

Gone are three-and-D players Avery Bradley and Jae Crowder, as well as the often boom-

or-bust big man Kelly Olynyk. Each contributed significantly to Boston's (brief) rise to the top. Bradley will be particularly missed; in addition to being one of the league's most tenacious defenders, he blossomed into the team's second-best scorer.

Stevens will need Terry Rozier, 23; Jaylen Brown, 20; and 19-year-old rookie Jayson Tatum to play

substantial roles on a contending team. Brown and Tatum provide defense and positional flexibility—the 6' 7" Brown even played some point guard in Summer League—while the athletic Rozier provides energy off the bench. How quickly Stevens can develop and trust his youngsters will determine the Celtics' ceiling this season.

PROJECTED LINEUP 2016-17 STATS

COACH SCOTT BROOKS
(2nd season with Wizards)

2016-17 RECORD 49-33
(1st in Southeast)

PG JOHN WALL
23.1 PPG; 10.7 APG; 45.1 FG%; 32.7 3FG%

SG BRADLEY BEAL
23.1 PPG; 3.5 APG; 48.2 FG%; 40.4 3FG%

SF OTTO PORTER JR.
13.4 PPG; 6.4 RPG; 51.6 FG%; 43.4 3FG%

PF MARKIEFF MORRIS
14.0 PPG; 6.5 RPG; 45.7 FG%; 36.2 3FG%

C MARCIN GORTAT
10.8 PPG; 10.4 RPG; 1.5 APG; 57.9 FG%

BENCH

SG JODIE MEEKS*
9.1 PPG; 2.1 RPG; 40.2 FG%; 40.9 3FG%

SF KELLY OUBRE JR.
6.3 PPG; 3.3 RPG; 42.1 FG%; 28.7 3FG%

C IAN MAHINMI
5.6 PPG; 4.8 RPG; 1.1 SPG; 58.6 FG%

● THE CROSSOVER TOP 100 RANKING *NEW ACQUISITION

ENEMY LINES

A RIVAL SCOUT SIZES
UP WASHINGTON

When guys play one year of college, you want them to get from Point A to Point E quickly, but they do stop at B, C, and D along the way. It took **JOHN WALL** a while, but I do think he's figured out how to blend distribution with scoring. He understands how to put a team on his back and when to defer to his very talented back-court mate in **BRADLEY BEAL**. He's maturing very well. . . . Beal has always played the game with such composure. He has a good, solid build and he doesn't waste energy, even while playing both ends of the floor. And he's unselfish. Beal is a pretty complete player for a guy who doesn't have other-worldly athletic superiority. . . . What's the window of opportunity with **MARCIN GORTAT**? He could be getting to the point where his game is on its way down. Still, he's their best starting option. Gortat's got consistency and fluidity. **IAN MAHINMI**, by contrast, has never been a comfortable scorer at all. . . . I can't see **OTTO PORTER JR.** ever being a No. 1 or No. 2 option, but at least he plays both ends of the floor. He's never going to score 20 a game, but maybe they don't need that from him. . . . They have a bunch of players who have gotten better every year: Beal, Wall, Porter. Maybe **KELLY OUBRE JR.** is ready to take that next step too. His value is more on the defensive end right now. To his credit, he's discovered that he doesn't have to be an elite scorer to impact the game. . . . **TOMAS SATORANSKY** defies positioning. Sometimes you just have to take a step back and say that he's simply a basketball player. That's why I like him so much as a prospect.



EASTERN CONFERENCE

WIZARDS

TELLING

77.3

STATISTIC

Small forward Otto Porter Jr. turned a career year into a massive contract this summer. His four-year, \$106.5 million max deal makes him the highest-paid player on the team until 2019-20, when John Wall's extension kicks in. One small

issue: **77.3% of the field goals Porter made were assisted last season**, a high number that calls into question his value without Wall, who was second in the league in assists per game.

No one is expecting Porter to turn

into an isolation sensation overnight. But as long as the Wizards have a pitiful bench—and they still do—they'll need to rely on their starting five more than any other team in the league. And the one player in that first unit with substantial room to improve is Porter, an efficient player and a dangerous catch-and-shoot scorer who was fifth

in the league in three-point percentage. (He's also a solid defender.) If Porter doesn't raise his game by becoming a threat with the ball in his hands, Washington's offense may have already reached its ceiling.






The Wizards are paying Porter like a franchise cornerstone. They need him to develop all the tools to be one.

BOTTOM LINE | A roster that looks just like last year's is destined for the same result: a second-round postseason departure.

PROJECTED LINEUP 2016-17 STATS

COACH DWANE CASEY
(7th season with Raptors)

2016-17 RECORD 51-31
(2nd in Atlantic)

	PG	KYLE LOWRY
19		22.4 PPG; 7.0 APG; 1.5 SPG; 46.4 FG%
	SG	DEMAR DEROZAN
36		27.3 PPG; 5.2 RPG; 3.9 APG; 46.7 FG%
	SF	CJ MILES*
		10.7 PPG; 3.0 RPG; 43.4 FG%; 41.4 3FG%
	PF	SERGE IBAKA
56		14.8 PPG; 6.8 RPG; 1.6 BPG; 48.0 FG%
	C	JONAS VALANCIUNAS
80		12.0 PPG; 9.5 RPG; 0.8 BPG; 55.7 FG%

BENCH

	SG	NORMAN POWELL
		8.4 PPG; 1.1 APG; 44.9 FG%; 32.4 3FG%
	PG	DELON WRIGHT
		5.6 PPG; 2.1 APG; 1.0 SPG; 42.2 FG%
	PF	PASCAL SIAKAM
		4.2 PPG; 3.4 RPG; 0.8 BPG; 50.2 FG%

● THE CROSSOVER TOP 100 RANKING *NEW ACQUISITION

EASTERN CONFERENCE

RAPTORS

TELLING

-1.5

STATISTIC

The Raptors have two talented big men in Serge Ibaka and Jonas Valanciunas, but the team struggled when they shared the frontcourt. **Toronto was outscored by 1.5 points per 100 possessions when the big**

men played together. (The margin was far worse, -9.5, in the playoffs.) It's unclear exactly how the 25-year-old Valanciunas fits into the modern NBA. Though he's a willing defender, he's vulnerable on pick-and-rolls and almost

useless against teams that consistently fire from deep. On offense, Valanciunas can post up effectively, but he offers no value as a floor spacer: In five seasons he has made one three in four attempts. Ibaka, 28, makes more sense at center. Though his defense has declined since his heyday in Oklahoma City, Ibaka can still protect the rim, and his outside

touch makes him a weapon at the other end.

In the offseason Toronto said goodbye to DeMarre Carroll, P.J. Tucker and Patrick Patterson. The addition of sharpshooter CJ Miles will help, but unless coach Dwane Casey embraces a smaller, spacier approach, his team's playoff struggles will continue.

ENEMY LINES

A RIVAL SCOUT SIZES
UP TORONTO

There's still a chance to win the conference with **KYLE LOWRY** and **DEMAR DEROZAN**. They've had a really good run here, and those guys are really tough and have a lot of playoff experience. . . . **CJ MILES** was a good pickup; they needed some more shooting, and he knows how to play. . . . With **SERGE IBAKA** and **JONAS VALANCIUNAS**, at least they have two guys who can really protect the basket. Not everyone has that. They're not going to have the advantage in every matchup, but the other team won't have that either. They've got shooting and shot blocking in Ibaka, and Valanciunas can score, and he's just so big. . . . I think **OG ANUNOBY** was a good pick where they got him [23rd overall]. They can turn him into a defensive-oriented player with his switchability and strength. He'll go through their program, which generally turns out pretty good players. They have a good understanding of what it takes to have success late in the draft, and I wouldn't put it past them to slip one by everyone with the Anunoby pick. . . . **NORMAN POWELL** could take a step forward, as long as he's in the right role where he's not asked to do too much. If they get to the playoffs, how is he used? Is he defending LeBron? Is that fair to him? Or is he defending a two guard, in a position to succeed? You can add him to the list of guys they've turned into solid NBA players. . . . **BRUNO CABOCCLO**—I watched him in the D-League. If he's gonna do it, it'll be this year or it'll be time to move on. [If he fails], it's not going to be because of his physical tools, that's for sure.



PROJECTED LINEUP 2016-17 STATS

COACH JASON KIDD
(4th season with Bucks)

2016-17 RECORD 42-40
(2nd in Central)

PG MALCOLM BROGDON
10.2 PPG; 4.2 APG; 45.7 FG%; 40.4 3FG%

SG TONY SNELL
8.5 PPG; 3.1 RPG; 45.5 FG%; 40.6 3FG%

SF KHRIS MIDDLETON
14.7 PPG; 4.2 RPG; 45.0 FG%; 43.3 3FG%

PF GIANNIS ANTETOKOUNMPO
22.9 PPG; 8.8 RPG; 5.4 APG; 52.1 FG%

C GREG MONROE
11.7 PPG; 6.6 RPG; 2.3 APG; 53.3 FG%

BENCH

PG MATTHEW DELLAVEDOVA
7.6 PPG; 4.7 APG; 39.0 FG%; 36.7 3FG%

C THON MAKER
4.0 PPG; 2.0 RPG; 45.9 FG%; 37.8 3FG%

SF JABARI PARKER (I)
20.1 PPG; 6.2 RPG; 49.0 FG%; 36.5 3FG%

● THE CROSSOVER TOP 100 RANKING (I) INJURED TO START SEASON

ENEMY LINES

A RIVAL SCOUT SIZES
UP MILWAUKEE

They have a star player in **GIANNIS ANTETOKOUNMPO** and have done a really good job surrounding him with the right kind of guys. You can play Antetokounmpo all over the floor, he can guard all these different positions, and his potential is off the charts. He's gonna be 23 this year! He has no ceiling, only how he limits himself. If he can become a 33 or 34% three-point shooter, he's pretty much unguardable. . . . **THON MAKER** was never Kevin Garnett or Kevin Durant—whoever was saying that was so stupid. But the guy's big, he cares, he plays hard, and he can probably be a three-point shooter. That's a win. . . . **MALCOLM BROGDON** is going to play for a long time, but generally you see a Rookie of the Year and say he's going to be an All-Star or something. I'm not sure that's the case with him. He might just be in a really good spot as a really good player. He guarded, played tough and is incredibly intelligent. . . . **KHRIS MIDDLETON** is one of the more underrated guys in the league, with his size and length and shooting. These two-way wing types are what everyone is looking for. They kind of turned **TONY SNELL** into that, too, and rebooted his career. They can play Antetokounmpo at center and surround him with four 6' 5"-plus guys, switch everything and make threes, run and gun. That just gives them so many options. . . . In a playoff game when their offense is sluggish, that's where **GREG MONROE's** value comes in. He's really tough, he's really physical, and he's proved capable of being able to score.



EASTERN CONFERENCE

BUCKS

TELLING

57

STATISTIC

The Bucks withstood injuries to Khrist Middleton and Jabari Parker to make the playoffs last season, then gave the Raptors a stern test in the first round. Thanks in large part to a suffocating defense, as well as stellar play from blossoming MVP candidate Giannis Antetokounmpo, Milwaukee has a very bright future. One more promising development from the postseason was the play of much-maligned 2016 lottery pick Thon Maker. Drafted

10th despite concerns over his real age—he was listed as 19—the 7' 1" South Sudan native was a frequent DNP-CD early on. **Maker appeared in only 57 games during the regular season,** starting 34. This year, though, coach Jason Kidd should use him as his full-time starter. The Bucks had a +11.9 net rating when Maker played with the rest

of the regular starters last season, but that group appeared in only 15 games. In the playoffs Maker showed that his defense is a huge upgrade over Greg Monroe's; he has also flashed potential as a three-point shooter from the corners. If Maker builds on what he showed late last season, the Bucks could become a terrifyingly strong—and long-team.

BOTTOM LINE | The Greek Freak gives the Bucks their best chance to end the franchise's 16-year streak without a playoff series win.

PROJECTED LINEUP 2016-17 STATS

COACH STEVE CLIFFORD
(5th season with Hornets)

2016-17 RECORD 36-46
(4th in Southeast)

PG KEMBA WALKER
23.2 PPG; 5.5 APG; 44.4 FG%; 39.9 3FG%

SG NICOLAS BATUM
15.1 PPG; 6.2 RPG; 5.9 APG; 40.3 FG%

SF MICHAEL KIDD-GILCHRIST
9.2 PPG; 7.0 RPG; 1.0 SPG; 47.7 FG%

PF MARVIN WILLIAMS
11.2 PPG; 6.6 RPG; 42.2 FG%; 35.0 3FG%

C DWIGHT HOWARD*
13.5 PPG; 12.7 RPG; 1.2 BPG; 63.3 FG%

BENCH

SG JEREMY LAMB
9.7 PPG; 4.3 RPG; 46.0 FG%; 28.1 3FG%

SG MALIK MONK (R)
19.8 PPG; 2.3 APG; 45.0 FG%; 39.7 3FG%

PF FRANK KAMINSKY
11.7 PPG; 4.5 RPG; 39.9 FG%; 32.8 3FG%

● THE CROSSOVER TOP 100 RANKING *NEW ACQUISITION
(R) ROOKIE, COLLEGE STATS

ENEMY LINES

A RIVAL SCOUT SIZES
UP CHARLOTTE

DWIGHT HOWARD is maligned, but I'm often overtaken by his physicality. I think to myself, How can this guy not be one of the best centers in basketball? He's a walking double double. Why isn't he a better version of Hassan Whiteside? Howard, to me, is a very big conundrum . . . I've always been a **KEMBA WALKER** fan. He has a chip on his shoulder but is not a high-maintenance player at all. He's got this joie de vivre when he's out there, and he gets better every year. He's not one of those guys looking for his next endorsement deal.

Kemba is just a plain ol' baller, man. . . **NICOLAS BATUM** is a versatile offensive talent and a great passer. On the defensive end he just leaves a little bit to be desired. . . **MICHAEL KIDD-GILCHRIST** is such a good defender. I thought that because he's a diligent worker his offense would eventually take root. It just hasn't. It's tough. The combination of Kidd-Gilchrist and Batum on the wing isn't good enough to be an upper-level team in the conference. . . Never could figure out **MARVIN WILLIAMS**'s game, to be honest . . . **CODY ZELLER** could play a little bit alongside Howard; he can face up and shoot. They've got a similar player in **FRANK KAMINSKY**, who finished the season pretty strong. It's tough to figure out how to make all those guys fit. . . There's very little chance **MALIK MONK** is going to play point guard in the NBA. He always reminds me of Lou Williams. He's just a natural, fluid, athletic, undersized scoring two guard. He'll be instant offense.

EASTERN CONFERENCE

HORNETS

TELLING

4.3

STATISTIC

The Hornets won 48 games in 2015-16, tied for the third most in the East. Last season they won only 36, finishing 11th in the conference. The culprit? **Charlotte's defense was 4.3 points per 100 possessions worse last**

season than the year before. A team that had never finished outside the top 10 in defensive efficiency during coach Steve Clifford's first three seasons dropped to 14th. The Hornets don't have a roster loaded

with offensive talent, which is why defending well is crucial. Clifford would seem to have the pieces to put together a lockdown squad, with Nicolas Batum, Michael Kidd-Gilchrist and Marvin Williams providing length and athleticism on the perimeter. But perimeter D is what killed the Hornets; they gave up an NBA-record 950 three-pointers. Batum in particular

will need to recommit himself; his defensive rating has worsened each of the past two years, from a very good 103 in 2015-16 to a pedestrian 108 last season. One source of help is Dwight Howard, who is joining his fifth team in six years. With Howard's rim-protecting behind them, Charlotte's wings should be able to tighten up around the three-point arc.





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PROJECTED LINEUP 2016-17 STATS

COACH ERIK SPOELSTRA
(10th season with Heat)

2016-17 RECORD 41-41
(3rd in Southeast)

PG GORAN DRAGIĆ
20.3 PPG; 5.8 APG; 47.5 FG%; 40.5 3FG%

SG DION WAITERS
15.8 PPG; 4.3 APG; 42.4 FG%; 39.5 3FG%

SF JUSTISE WINSLOW
10.9 PPG; 5.2 RPG; 3.7 APG; 35.6 FG%

PF JAMES JOHNSON
12.8 PPG; 4.9 RPG; 47.9 FG%; 34.0 3FG%

C HASSAN WHITESIDE
17.0 PPG; 14.1 RPG; 2.1 BPG; 55.7 FG%

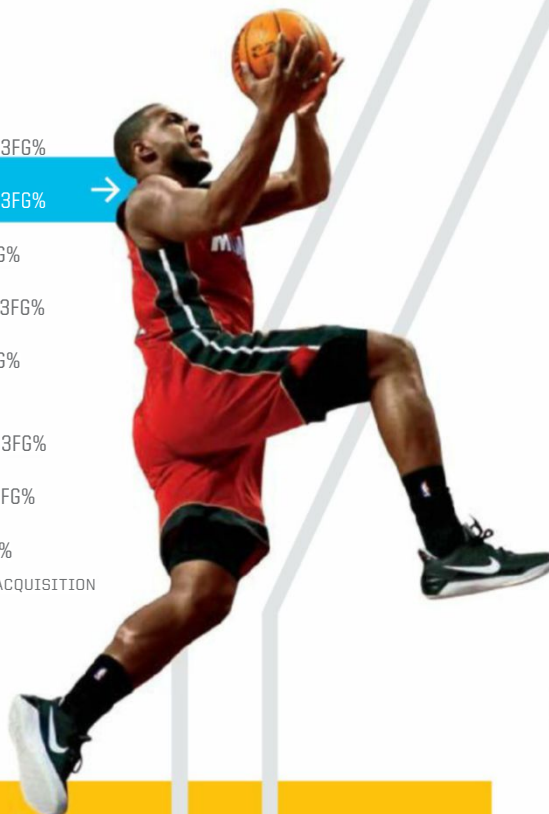
BENCH

SG JOSH RICHARDSON
10.2 PPG; 2.6 APG; 39.4 FG%; 33.0 3FG%

SF RODNEY MCGRUDER
6.4 PPG; 3.3 RPG; 41.3 FG%; 33.2 3FG%

PF KELLY OLYNYK*
9.0 PPG; 4.8 RPG; 2.0 APG; 51.2 FG%

● THE CROSSOVER TOP 100 RANKING *NEW ACQUISITION



ENEMY LINES

A RIVAL SCOUT SIZES
UP MIAMI

I never knew **GORAN DRAGIĆ** was so good until his play last season and this summer at Eurobasket. He checks the box at point guard. If he can continue to shoot this well, I really like him. . . . I know there's a cost [on offense] associated with relying on **HASSAN WHITESIDE**, but there are so many teams out there that would just die for a guy who can protect the rim like that, an effortless athlete who just flows. So much of the game comes from natural ability. From that standpoint, there are few guys out there like Whiteside. . . . **JUSTISE WINSLOW** is another guy who understands the critical importance of defense. He'll defend twos and threes and some fours, but what are you going to do with him on the offensive end? . . . Whether he's starting or coming off the bench, **DION WAITERS** is coming to score. I don't know if you can get him to defend, but his points per minute will be among the tops in the league. . . . **KELLY OLYNYK** is enough of a low-maintenance guy to make sense here. The ability to fit in without standing out is almost a skill unto itself. . . . **JOSH RICHARDSON** and **TYLER JOHNSON** don't have elite athleticism, but they play hard, defend and hit shots. With Waiters in the lineup there's not necessarily room for either to be a bigger scorer, but you value these overachievers because they fit in so well. . . . If **JAMES JOHNSON** is able to duplicate what he did last year, that would be big for Miami. But for a player to continue to climb this deep into his career is rare. . . . You have to consider Miami's season last year as evidence of really good coaching.

EASTERN CONFERENCE

HEAT

TELLING

35.3m

STATISTIC

The Heat will pay Dion Waiters, James Johnson and Kelly Olynyk \$35.3 million this season, which means they're betting big on consistent success from a historically inconsistent trio. And each is locked up

through at least 2020. Waiters and Johnson joined Miami last summer and put up career-best numbers. The 25-year-old Waiters played in only 46 games and is hardly as gifted a shooter as his gunning would suggest. (He connected on

less than 32% from deep in two of his first four seasons before last year, when he buried 39.5%.) Johnson is a versatile forward, but he'll turn 31 in February, and last year was the first time he averaged double figures. Olynyk, 26, often frustrated Boston fans with his up-and-down play, and despite some playoff heroics, the Celtics let him go to make room for Gordon Hayward.





After a horrible, injury-plagued start, Miami went 30-11 in the second half of last season, thanks largely to the shooting of Waiters and Johnson. If Erik Spoelstra and his staff can continue to get the best out of them—and Olynyk—the Heat will have invested wisely. If not, Miami will be paying a heavy price for three years of mediocrity.



PROJECTED LINEUP 2016-17 STATS

COACH STAN VAN GUNDY
(4th season with Pistons)

2016-17 RECORD 37-45
(5th in Central)

 PG	REGGIE JACKSON 14.5 PPG; 5.2 APG; 41.9 FG%; 35.9 3FG%
 SG	AVERY BRADLEY* 16.3 PPG; 6.1 RPG; 46.3 FG%; 39.0 3FG%
 SF	TOBIAS HARRIS 16.1 PPG; 5.1 RPG; 48.1 FG%; 34.7 3FG%
PF	JON LEUER 10.2 PPG; 5.4 RPG; 1.5 APG; 48.0 FG%
 C	ANDRE DRUMMOND 13.6 PPG; 13.8 RPG; 1.5 SPG; 53.0 FG%
BENCH	
PG	ISH SMITH 9.4 PPG; 2.9 RPG; 5.2 APG; 43.9 FG%
SF	STANLEY JOHNSON 4.4 PPG; 2.5 RPG; 35.3 FG%; 29.2 3FG%
SG	LUKE KENNARD (R) 19.5 PPG; 5.1 RPG; 49.0 FG%; 43.8 3FG%

● THE CROSSOVER TOP 100 RANKING *NEW ACQUISITION
(R) ROOKIE, COLLEGE STATS



ENEMY LINES

A RIVAL SCOUT SIZES
UP DETROIT

People look at the roster and say they're trying to replicate what Stan Van Gundy had in Orlando, but that doesn't take into account how good Hedo Turkoglu was. The Pistons don't have a front-court player like that who can initiate offense and shoot around 40% from three. **JON LEUER**'s not that caliber of player. **TOBIAS HARRIS** is more of a scorer and shooter than a playmaker. . . . So much is going to depend on **REGGIE JACKSON**. If he's healthy and they've let bygones be bygones, the team can be good. . . . **ANDRE DRUMMOND** has potential to be a two-way player—he's not a zero. If he can get to 50% free throw shooting, continue to be a leading rebounder and be more of a shot blocker, that's great, because he can move his feet on the perimeter and guard pick-and-rolls. Just don't throw him the ball on a post up. He's got to be a roll guy and feast on the offensive glass. . . . **AVERY BRADLEY** will help them because he's a more consistent shooter than Kentavious Caldwell-Pope. . . . The fact that they traded Marcus Morris is a signal they still have high hopes for **STANLEY JOHNSON** because of the role he played in the playoffs as a rookie [in 2015-16]. But the clock is ticking. All he has to do to make good money is make open threes and guard. In the past he's tried to do too much. . . . Stan is so good at putting guys like **LUKE KENNARD** in positions to succeed. He's not strictly a spot-up shooter; he's a playmaker. They can play him with **LANGSTON GALLOWAY**, get Galloway running off the ball and let Kennard handle it. There's a lot of fun ways they can use him.

EASTERN CONFERENCE

PISTONS

TELLING

12.0

STATISTIC

The Pistons have an Andre Drummond problem. He looked to be a dominating force early in his career, but the shifting focus of NBA offenses has rendered the 6'11" center's inside-only game largely unimportant. Without

impeccable back line defense, Drummond's flashes of brilliance won't make him worthy of his five-year, \$127.2 million contract. The numbers paint a horrifying picture: **Detroit was 12.0 points**

per 100 possessions better with Drummond off the court. (Both his offensive and defensive splits were negative.) It didn't help that he hit just 38.6% of his free throws and blocked a career-low 1.1 shots per game. Coach Stan Van Gundy has to figure out how to juggle his lineups when his team's highest-paid player is making a profoundly negative impact.

Meanwhile, the Pistons' second-highest-paid player, Reggie Jackson, saw his scoring average drop by more than four points last season. Unless Van Gundy can coax a committed defensive performance from Drummond and get consistent play from Jackson, he might find that his team is closer to a full-on rebuilding project than anyone in Detroit would care to admit.

BOTTOM LINE | The Pistons aren't exactly inspiring, but in the East they've still got enough talent to sneak into the playoffs.



PROJECTED LINEUP 2016-17 STATS

COACH BRETT BROWN
(5th season with 76ers)

2016-17 RECORD 28-54
(4th in Atlantic)

PG MARKELLE FULTZ (R)
23.2 PPG; 5.9 APG; 47.6 FG%; 41.3 3FG%

SG J.J. REDICK*
15.0 PPG; 1.4 APG; 44.5 FG%; 42.9 3FG%

SF BEN SIMMONS (R*)
19.2 PPG; 11.8 RPG; 4.8 APG; 56.0 FG%

PF DARIO SARIC
12.8 PPG; 6.3 RPG; 41.1 FG%; 31.1 3FG%

C JOEL EMBIID
20.2 PPG; 7.8 RPG; 46.6 FG%; 36.7 3FG%

BENCH

SF ROBERT COVINGTON
12.9 PPG; 6.5 RPG; 39.9 FG%; 33.3 3FG%

SG NIK STAUSKAS
9.5 PPG; 2.8 RPG; 39.6 FG%; 36.8 3FG%

PF AMIR JOHNSON*
6.5 PPG; 4.6 RPG; 1.8 APG; 57.6 FG%

● THE CROSSOVER TOP 100 PLAYERS *NEW ACQUISITION
(R) ROOKIE, COLLEGE STATS (R*) ROOKIE, 2015-16 COLLEGE STATS



ENEMY LINES

A RIVAL SCOUT SIZES
UP PHILADELPHIA

There are a lot of things to work out, like who's going to have the ball down the stretch, **BEN SIMMONS** or **MARKELLE FULTZ**? Is **JOEL EMBIID** always going to be healthy enough? ... Embiid can be the best player in the league, definitely the best defensive player. He's so dominant, he can switch on a guard. He's unstoppable, man, he's a two-way player. ... Optimally, Simmons is their point guard because he needs the ball to be effective, to create shots for other guys. Because his shooting's going to be a problem. ... Fultz, that guy is a super talent. He's going to have an ability to create shots in pick-and-rolls and in isolation. ... **J.J. REDICK** is really good with young players. I don't think that's said enough. He's vocal, he's tough, he's got his routine and he's very dedicated. ... **DARIO SARIC**, he made 100 threes too. He comes off the bench and can play a bunch of different roles. He's so tough. ... You're hopeful for **JAHLIL OKAFOR** because he was picked so high [No. 3 in 2015], but the league has changed. The thing is, I don't think he's been fully utilized. He's a very, very good passer, he can get his own shot in iso situations, he can command a double team. If you have that, even in short minutes, it's valuable. But he's got to be a better defender and rebounder. ... Look at their transaction logs from four or five years ago, it's crazy, and they mined **ROBERT COVINGTON** out of that mess. He's got size, can make threes, guard all over the floor. He never dribbles, and he only shoots threes and layups. Playing with Simmons and Fultz, he can be a really good piece.

EASTERN CONFERENCE

76ERS

TELLING

12.6

STATISTIC

Center Joel Embiid played the first 31 games of his career last season before being shut down with a left knee injury. That means that **Embiid has played in only 12.6% of Philadelphia's games in the three years since he was**

drafted third overall.

But those 31 games were tantalizing. Embiid swatted shots, drained threes, ran the floor and threw down dunks. The 76ers were 13-18 with him in the lineup and 15-36 without him. Simply put, if they are serious about

competing for a playoff spot, Embiid must be on the court.

There are other reasons to be excited in Philadelphia, starting with the last two top picks in the draft. Ben Simmons, effectively a 6'10" point guard, will make his NBA debut after missing all of last season with a broken right foot. And he'll share time in the backcourt with a gifted scorer and creator in 6'4" Markelle Fultz.

Philly has to be concerned that Embiid's body couldn't hold up last season despite playing on a minutes restriction. When training camp opened, he was still sidelined after knee surgery. The 7-footer has come to embody the Sixers' painstaking rebuilding approach, a.k.a. the Process. Unless he's healthy, there is more pain to come.

BOTTOM LINE | Inexperience plus injury-prone players add up to a sixth straight season without a playoff berth.

PROJECTED LINEUP 2016-17 STATS

COACH JEFF HORNACEK
(2nd season with Knicks)

2016-17 RECORD 31-51
(3rd in Atlantic)

PG RAMON SESSIONS*
6.2 PPG; 1.5 RPG; 2.6 APG; 38.0 3FG%

SG TIM HARDAWAY JR.*
14.5 PPG; 2.3 APG; 45.5 FG%; 35.7 3FG%

SF DOUG McDERMOTT*
9.0 PPG; 2.7 RPG; 44.7 FG%; 37.0 3FG%

PF KRISTAPS PORZINGIS
18.1 PPG; 7.2 RPG; 45.0 FG%; 35.7 3FG%

C WILLY HERNANGOMEZ
8.2 PPG; 7.0 RPG; 1.3 APG; 52.9 FG%

BENCH

C ENES KANTER*
14.3 PPG; 6.7 RPG; 0.5 BPG; 54.5 FG%

PG FRANK NTILIKINA (R)
5.2 PPG; 1.4 APG; 48.5 FG%; 43.1 3FG%

SG COURTNEY LEE
10.8 PPG; 3.4 RPG; 2.3 APG; 45.6 FG%

● THE CROSSOVER TOP 100 RANKING *NEW ACQUISITION
(R) ROOKIE, EUROPEAN STATS

EASTERN CONFERENCE

KNICKS

TELLING

24.3

STATISTIC

During his breakout second season, **Kristaps Porzingis's usage rate was 24.3—which was actually lower than the rate from his rookie season.**

How to explain the decline? Try sharing the court with Carmelo

Anthony and Derrick Rose, each of whom had a rate of more than 25. Now that Melo and Rose are gone, Porzingis's rate should rise to the low 30s—but only if the Knicks are finally committed to making the 7-footer the

face of the franchise.

There's no doubt Anthony was holding back Porzingis, in part by taking most of the important late-game opportunities for himself. Porzingis should not only have the offense run through him this season, but he should also be given the chance to prove his clutch bona fides.

New York also parted ways with president Phil Jackson. But the first

significant move the team made after he left, signing Tim Hardaway Jr.—whom Jackson had traded away two years earlier—to a four-year, \$71 million contract is a risky one. And the rest of the roster remains loaded with iffy veterans. If the 22-year-old Porzingis is going to succeed in his new role, the Knicks need to get him the right supporting cast, quickly.

ENEMY LINES

A RIVAL SCOUT SIZES UP NEW YORK

They definitely have the right leadership in place. They have veteran front office personnel, people who have experience winning and experience in their positions. So I would contend that the future is bright for them. . . . **FRANK NTILIKINA** is better than people think, and it's too bad he's getting put in this bucket of "Phil [Jackson] took him for the triangle, and now he's gone." That's the most lazy, stupid comment of all time, because that kid is big [6' 5"], he's skilled and he likes to play defense. He wasn't playing at a superhigh level in the French league, but the team went to the finals and he contributed to that. It was the right pick, because it was a swing for the fences based on talent, and he's got a lot of it. . . . **WILLY HERNANGOMEZ** is another solid young piece. I don't think people understand how good he can be either. He's not playing just because he's big. . . . **RON BAKER** is a nice, solid player, but if he was on a very good team he'd probably be the fifth guard. . . . **COURTNEY LEE** is still valuable but not on a team that's building. He needs to go to a playoff team to be maximized, like he was in Charlotte. . . . I don't know what the motivation was behind signing **MICHAEL BEASLEY**. . . . Is **TIM HARDAWAY JR.** really that bad? He's gonna get smashed because he got signed to that contract this summer, but what, is he supposed to say no? Wings are really, really valuable and there's not a lot of them. The guy made 149 threes last year, he's durable, he's tough and he plays defense. It's not an untradable contract.



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PROJECTED LINEUP 2016-17 STATS

COACH NATE MCMILLAN
(2nd season with Pacers)

2016-17 RECORD 42-40
(3rd in Central)

PG DARREN COLLISON*
13.2 PPG; 4.6 APG; 47.6 FG%; 41.7 3FG%

SG VICTOR OLADIPO*
15.9 PPG; 4.3 RPG; 44.2 FG%; 36.1 3FG%

SF BOJAN BOGDANOVICH*
13.7 PPG; 3.4 RPG; 44.5 FG%; 36.7 3FG%

PF THADDEUS YOUNG
11.0 PPG; 6.1 RPG; 1.5 SPG; 52.7 FG%

C MYLES TURNER
14.5 PPG; 7.3 RPG; 2.1 BPG; 51.1 FG%

BENCH

SG LANCE STEPHENSON*
6.8 PPG; 2.9 RPG; 3.3 APG; 45.0 FG%

SF GLENN ROBINSON III
6.1 PPG; 3.6 RPG; 46.7 FG%; 39.2 3FG%

PF DOMANTAS SABONIS*
5.9 PPG; 3.6 RPG; 39.9 FG%; 32.1 3FG%

● THE CROSSEVER TOP 100 RANKING *NEW ACQUISITION



EASTERN CONFERENCE

PACERS

TELLING
1,348
STATISTIC

The Pacers lost a lot by trading away Paul George. They lost their best scorer, their best defender and their best creator. Not only will Indiana have to figure out how to make up for all of George's contributions, but on a more

rudimentary level it will also have to figure out which players will take **the 1,348 shots—the fifth-most in the franchise's NBA history—that George hoisted** last season.

The roster lacks a go-to scorer. Victor Oladipo will

almost certainly volunteer for the job, but as a career 43.4% marksman he hasn't proved he's ready for the role. In fact, he barely succeeded as a sidekick to Russell Westbrook in Oklahoma City.

A more intriguing option is Myles Turner, 21, a third-year center with All-Star potential. He significantly improved his touch last year, hitting 51.1% of his shots.

While primarily a midrange threat, he also developed a three-pointer, making 40 treys, up from three as a rookie. At 6'11" and 243 pounds, Turner also has the size to bang down low when necessary.

The Pacers' immediate outlook is far from good, but turning Turner into the No. 1 option on offense will at least speed the way to being a foundational piece.

ENEMY LINES

A RIVAL SCOUT SIZES
UP INDIANA

The Pacers looked at the Paul George trade like, Well, we'll send the guy to the other conference so we don't have to play against him this year. But **VICTOR OLADIPO** will help them. He's shown us about what we can expect from him. He's a solid player, a little undersized as a two guard. He gets by on his grit and toughness. . . . They tried to rush **DOMANTAS SABONIS** in OKC and made him shoot threes—the first two months of the season he didn't shoot a free throw. It was ridiculous considering his greatest asset at Gonzaga was being around the basket, playing at the elbows. So I think there's some untapped ability there. . . . This is the year we're going to find out how good **MYLES TURNER** is. Was he a beneficiary of playing with George and other good players, or was he really a heavy participant and driver in their success? . . . With **THADDEUS YOUNG** and **CORY JOSEPH** they have some solid pieces, but they're going to have to decide which guys to go forward with so they don't block the progress of ones they believe in. They could trade Young or Joseph or **DARREN COLLISON**—teams always need backup guards at the deadline. . . . **GLENN ROBINSON III** got better last year. He accepted his role and really fought defensively, worked hard and then he made shots. They have to think, O.K., this could be a guy for us going forward. . . . Does anyone pay **LANCE STEPHENSON** attention anymore? The last time he was good was the year he was trying to get paid, and since then he's been almost more trouble than he's worth.



PROJECTED LINEUP 2016-17 STATS

COACH MIKE BUDENHOLZER
(5th season with Hawks)

2016-17 RECORD 43-39
(2nd in Southeast)

PG DENNIS SCHRÖDER
17.9 PPG; 6.3 APG; 45.1 FG%; 34.0 3FG%

SG KENT BAZEMORE
11.0 PPG; 3.2 RPG; 40.9 FG%; 34.6 3FG%

SF TAUREAN PRINCE
5.7 PPG; 2.7 RPG; 40.0 FG%; 32.4 3FG%

PF ERSAN ILYASOVA
13.1 PPG; 5.9 RPG; 43.1 FG%; 35.3 3FG%

C DEWAYNE DEDMON*
5.1 PPG; 6.5 RPG; 0.8 BPG; 62.2 FG%

BENCH

SG MARCO BELINELLI*
10.5 PPG; 2.4 RPG; 42.9 FG%; 36.0 3FG%

PG MALCOLM DELANEY
5.4 PPG; 2.6 APG; 37.4 FG%; 23.6 3FG%

PF LUKE BABBITT*
4.8 PPG; 2.1 RPG; 40.2 FG%; 41.4 3FG%

● THE CROSSOVER TOP 100 RANKING *NEW ACQUISITION

ENEMY LINES

A RIVAL SCOUT SIZES
UP ATLANTA

Looking at their roster, I'm wondering, Can we please play them six times this year? Wow, man. **DENNIS SCHRÖDER** is your best player. He played really well at Eurobasket, but man. I'm glad I'm not a season-ticket holder there. . . . When you [lose] the locker room presence and solid foundational pieces like Al Horford and Paul Millsap, it almost creates a vacuum. . . . How quickly can we figure out if **DEANDRE' BEMBRY** is a starting two guard? How quickly can we get **JOHN COLLINS** going? This team could be in for a long season. . . . I think **KENT BAZEMORE** is a bench guy, but on this team he's going to have to average 14 or 15 field goal attempts per game. I just don't think he's a natural offensive guy. He's always been a really good defender, but he's making \$16.9 million this season and last year shot 41% from the field. Geez. . . . If you're a really good team, I don't know that **TAUREAN PRINCE** is playing more than 18 minutes a game for you. There's nothing to really sink your teeth into with his game. . . . Atlanta's centers are just all different looks. **MIKE MUSCALA** is a finesse player who has kind of grown into the position, but there's not much physicality to him. **DEWAYNE DEDMON** can rebound, block shots and play defense. If you could [combine] the three different centers they have there, you'd have a really good player. You could take Dedmon's defense and Muscala's footwork, and you could use **MILES PLUMLEE**'s face-up shooting. But individually, none of those three are really bona fide starter material.

EASTERN CONFERENCE

HAWKS

TELLING

48.9

STATISTIC

The Hawks parted ways with Paul Millsap, Tim Hardaway, Dwight Howard and Thabo Sefolosha over the summer. Late last season they traded Kyle Korver to Cleveland. **Those five departed players were**

responsible for 48.9% of Atlanta's offense.

These aren't your older brother's Hawks. Mike Budenholzer's whip-the-ball-around, shoot-the-three offense will be harder to run this season, and the coach's offensive

expertise will really be put to the test now that he has to rely on Ersan Ilyasova and Taurean Prince.

Millsap's departure will hurt the most. His two-way game covered up a lot of Atlanta's deficiencies, and switching to Ilyasova—a fine shooter, a willing charge-taker and not much else—is a massive downgrade.

Three years ago the Hawks sent four of their starters



to the All-Star Game. Now it's hard to see how this team can keep up with the top half of the conference. After years and years of being a perennial playoff participant—but hardly anything more—the franchise is easing itself into what will soon be a much-needed rebuild.

BOTTOMLINE | It was a good decade, but Atlanta's run of 10 straight seasons with a playoff berth is coming to an end.

PROJECTED LINEUP 2016-17 STATS

COACH FRANK VOGEL
(2nd season with Magic)

2016-17 RECORD 29-53
(5th in Southeast)

	PG ELFRID PAYTON 12.8 PPG; 4.7 RPG; 6.5 APG; 47.1 FG%
SG	EVAN FOURNIER 17.2 PPG; 3.1 RPG; 43.9 FG%; 35.6 3FG%
SF	TERRENCE ROSS 11.0 PPG; 2.6 RPG; 43.7 FG%; 36.3 3FG%
PF	AARON GORDON 12.7 PPG; 5.1 RPG; 45.4 FG%; 28.8 3FG% →
	C NIKOLA VUCEVIC 14.6 PPG; 10.4 RPG; 2.8 APG; 46.8 FG%
BENCH	
SG	ARRON AFFLALO* 8.4 PPG; 2.0 RPG; 44.0 FG%; 41.1 3FG%
SF	JONATHON SIMMONS* 6.2 PPG; 2.1 RPG; 1.6 APG; 42.0 FG%
C	BISMACK BIYOMBO 6.0 PPG; 7.0 RPG; 1.1 APG; 52.8 FG%

● THE CROSSOVER TOP 100 RANKING *NEW ACQUISITION



ENEMY LINES

A RIVAL SCOUT SIZES
UP ORLANDO

This has to be the year that **ELFRID PAYTON** shows that he's capable of orchestration. He's had streaks. At the end of last year he was putting up triple doubles, and I thought he might finally be getting it. I'm curious how Payton is going to generate his scoring. Is he going to be a slasher? How much can he improve his shooting? It's not just that he can't shoot. He *doesn't* shoot. . . . **NIKOLA VUCEVIC** would remind me of Brook Lopez if he could rebound better. He's going to fill the scoring void and can shoot a reasonably high percentage, but how much you can contribute is limited when you can't defend. . . . **BISMACK BIYOMBO** is going to be limited offensively forever. If you could take Biyombo's defense and Vucevic's offense, you'd have an All-Star. . . . **EVAN FOURNIER** is just a crafty, smart player. He can handle the ball, he can initiate some offense, but the bottom line is that he just produces. He's not an elite athlete, but he plays under control and that makes him consistent. . . . **AARON GORDON** has so much raw ability. The dunks are just a manifestation of his athletic superiority. Some guys are difference-makers the minute they step into the league. Then there are guys, like Gordon, who get incrementally better each year. If they can establish a positionless system at times, Gordon can flourish. . . . You want more from **MARIO HEZONJA**, but he's never demonstrated—even overseas—that he'll regularly attack the rim. I don't think he knows what his NBA identity is going to be yet and by Year Three, that's kind of important.

EASTERN CONFERENCE

MAGIC

TELLING

63

STATISTIC

Orlando had a terrible summer in 2016, acquiring too many frontcourt players without a place for them all. As a result, Aaron Gordon, one of the team's most gifted athletes, spent the year being hamstrung as part of a

mismanaged roster. An athletic 6'9", 220 pounder, Gordon is ideal as a small-ball center. At the very least he should be a power forward, his position in 2015-16, when he was the Magic's most improved player. But last

season **Gordon played 63% of his minutes at small forward**, much to the detriment of the offense, which ranked 29th in efficiency. Gordon's lack of an outside touch—he's a career 28.9% three-point shooter—prevented Orlando from spacing the floor.

The trade of Serge Ibaka to the Raptors last February finally allowed Gordon to get more minutes at

power forward. With Ibaka gone, Gordon averaged 16.2 points and 6.2 rebounds, up from 11.2 and 4.5 before the trade.

The departure of Jeff Green, who signed with the Cavs, will further ease the power forward logjam. Gordon will be a restricted free agent next summer. This year is his best chance to prove he deserves to be a part of the Magic's future.



BOTTOM LINE | Despite an intriguing young core, the Magic are still too raw to expect results this year.

PROJECTED LINEUP 2016-17 STATS

COACH KENNY ATKINSON
(2nd season with Nets)

2016-17 RECORD 20-62
(5th in Atlantic)

PG JEREMY LIN
14.5 PPG; 5.1 APG; 43.8 FG%; 37.2 3FG%

SG D'ANGELO RUSSELL*
15.6 PPG; 4.8 APG; 40.5 FG%; 35.2 3FG%

SF ALLEN CRABBE*
10.7 PPG; 2.9 RPG; 46.8 FG%; 44.4 3FG%

PF RONDAE HOLLIS-JEFFERSON
8.7 PPG; 5.8 RPG; 1.1 SPG; 43.4 FG%

C TIMOFEY MOZGOV*
7.4 PPG; 4.9 RPG; 0.6 BPG; 51.5 FG%

BENCH

SF DEMARRE CARROLL*
8.9 PPG; 3.8 RPG; 40.0 FG%; 34.1 3FG%

SG CARIS LEVERT
8.2 PPG; 3.3 RPG; 45.0 FG%; 32.1 3FG%

PF TREVOR BOOKER
10.0 PPG; 8.0 RPG; 1.9 APG; 51.6 FG%

● THE CROSSOVER TOP 100 RANKING *NEW ACQUISITION



ENEMY LINES

A RIVAL SCOUT SIZES
UP BROOKLYN

They've established a culture and an identity. They play hard, they shoot threes and play fast. They led the league in pace, and it's an aesthetically pleasing style. They just have to add pieces. . . . **D'ANGELO RUSSELL** can make pull-up threes off the dribble, and that's a valuable skill. He's also an accomplished pick-and-roll player. The mistake was thinking he's a point guard. . . . **JEREMY LIN** has been good for them. There could be an opportunity to flip him to a team that needs another shot creator for the playoffs. . . . I'm curious to see how they allocate playing to all their wings. Do they play some out of position to try to create some mismatches? That could happen. . . . How much of **ALLEN CRABBE**'s success was based on the position he was in in Portland? Will he get as many open shots? How does he react when defenses are geared on stopping him? But take his money out of the picture, and he's turned himself into a pretty good role player. . . . Playing the four is **RONDAE HOLLIS-JEFFERSON**'s only chance because of his shooting, but I wouldn't underestimate him. He can rebound and push and create a shot for someone in transition, and that's how they want to play. . . . **TIMOFEY MOZGOV** was the price to get Russell, but at least he's serviceable. He's a great guy, great teammate and he can protect the basket when necessary. . . . I thought **DEMARRE CARROLL** was a good risk too, another culture guy. He can shoot, play the three or four. [Acquiring him from the Raptors in a salary dump] was a no-risk thing and they got [Toronto's first-round] pick out of it.

EASTERN CONFERENCE

NETS

TELLING

33.8

STATISTIC

Among the Nets' many, many problems last year was terrible long-range shooting. Only three teams had more attempts from beyond the arc, and **only four had worse three-point accuracy than Brooklyn's 33.8%.**

So over the summer, GM Sean Marks acquired Allen Crabbe from the Blazers, who were happy to unload the remaining three years and \$56.3 million of his contract. (Crabbe got such a rich deal because the Nets signed him to an offer

sheet in the summer of 2016 and Portland matched it). Crabbe hit 44.4% of his threes last year, a figure topped only by Kyle Korver.

Marks also swung a deal with the Lakers for D'Angelo Russell, who immediately becomes the most intriguing player on the roster. He shoots well from three (35.2% last season) and he's athletic enough to be productive

in the paint. Russell struggled in Los Angeles for a variety of reasons—the Kobe cloud in Year 1, a baffling roster in Year 2—but he's still just 21, with skills that made him the No. 2 pick in the 2015 draft.

As a former member of the Spurs' brain trust, Marks knows the value of outside shooting. Now his team has some quality marksmen to justify the quantity.

BOTTOM LINE | Once again the Nets don't have their first-round pick, so they won't benefit from their misfortunes. There will be many.

PROJECTED LINEUP 2016-17 STATS

COACH FRED HOIBERG
(3rd season with Bulls)

2016-17 RECORD 41-41
(4th in Central)

PG KRIS DUNN*
3.8 PPG; 2.4 APG; 1.0 SPG; 37.7 FG%

SG ZACH LAVINE (I)*
18.9 PPG; 3.4 RPG; 45.9 FG%; 38.7 3FG%

SF JUSTIN HOLIDAY*
7.7 PPG; 2.7 RPG; 43.3 FG%; 35.5 3FG%

PF BOBBY PORTIS
6.8 PPG; 4.6 RPG; 48.8 FG%; 33.3 3FG%

C ROBIN LOPEZ
10.4 PPG; 6.4 RPG; 1.4 BPG; 49.3 FG%

BENCH

SF PAUL ZIPSER
5.5 PPG; 2.8 RPG; 39.8 FG%; 33.3 3FG%

PG JERIAN GRANT
5.9 PPG; 1.9 APG; 42.5 FG%; 36.6 3FG%

PF LAURI MARKKANEN (R)
15.6 PPG; 7.2 RPG; 49.2 FG%; 42.3 3FG%

● THE CROSSOVER TOP 100 RANKING *NEW ACQUISITION
(I) INJURED TO START SEASON (R) ROOKIE, COLLEGE STATS

EASTERN CONFERENCE

BULLS

TELLING

25

STATISTIC

Chicago will be the league's worst team. In trading Jimmy Butler, buying out Dwyane Wade and letting Rajon Rondo walk, the front office realized that the "Three Alphas" experiment was an utter failure, and instead it opted

for a full-on rebuild this summer.

So Windy City fans have just one thing to look forward to: the draft. Luckily for the Bulls, lottery reform doesn't kick in until next season, so **they will still have a 25% chance at getting the**

No. 1 pick by finishing with the worst record. (It would be 14% next year.) And it's hard to imagine any other team being worse.

The athletic, 6'5" Zach LaVine, the main piece acquired from the Timberwolves for Butler, can put the ball in the basket, but he won't be cleared for contact until November as he recovers from tearing his left ACL

last February. Robin Lopez is a hard worker, and Nikola Mirotic has a decent stroke. Aside from those three, the rest of the roster is filled with young players who haven't flashed any star potential. They had a total of four 20-point games last year between them.

All that adds up to a huge pile of losses and, with luck, a new era starting next June.

ENEMY LINES

A RIVAL SCOUT SIZES
UP CHICAGO

LAURI MARKKANEN is pretty interesting. He's 7 feet, he can shoot fast, he has a better handle than he showed at Arizona, and every team in the league is looking for a big guy who can shoot. I mean,

Ryan Anderson's making \$20 million a year. Markkanen has his issues, but they're gonna be able to cover for him a little bit. . . . **ZACH LAVINE** benefited from taking a lot of shots last year for a Minnesota team that was bad. Is he a foundation piece? No. But I think they looked at it from the standpoint that he's 23, he can help us win now and he's talented enough. At minimum he can be a good defensive player. . . .

Does **NIKOLA MIROTIC** fit what they want to be and do? He's made 363 threes in three years, and I always thought he had a little more to his game than he's shown. He was slotted as a three-point shooter early in his career, so that's what people think he is. . . . **ROBIN LOPEZ** could be a tradable guy at the deadline for a team that wants to play with size in the playoffs or wants to be heavy on the offensive boards. He's out of place right now given the direction they decided to go. . . . **DENZEL VALENTINE** is so challenged athletically. Can he be a spot-up three-point shooter? I think so, but it's hard to see him as a starter on a deep playoff team. . . . They have some pretty good international scouting, and **CRISTIANO FELICIO** has been a good get for them. He may be a tradable piece too. . . . **BOBBY PORTIS** is probably a really good three-point-shooting center. That's what he's got to start to get his head around.

BOTTOM LINE | It's going to be ugly. Very ugly. The franchise record for losses (67 in 2000-01) will be under attack.

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2017-18 ENTERTAINMENT VALUE GUIDE

BY BEN GOLLIVER ◀

GOLDEN STATE has sparked two simultaneous arms races, one stylistic and one structural. On the court, the Warriors' preferred approach—pace, space and ball movement—has swept through the league. Off the court, their collection of stars has set off a wave of roster movement among top contenders. Rival stars and executives reached the same conclusion this summer: There's no way to beat the champs at their own game without approximating their talent.

Scoring reached its highest point in 24 years last season, and it could go up even more with so many aspiring Super-teams on the horizon. Here's how the booming NBA shapes up in terms of entertainment value, from *FOMO-inspiring* to *Yawn-inducing*. Criteria include projected success, style of play, firepower, age, health, coaching and personality.

1 WARRIORS The Dubs Dynasty seeks its third title in four years with help from an upgraded bench. As if Kevin Durant, Stephen Curry and Draymond Green really needed reinforcements.

2 ROCKETS Mike D'Antoni and **JAMES HARDEN** made a better pairing than anyone expected, and now Chris Paul arrives as a second elite playmaker. More three-point records will fall.

3 THUNDER **PAUL GEORGE** and Carmelo Anthony will prevent Russell Westbrook from drifting back into one-man-band gimmickry. OKC's new trio will be engrossing whether it booms or busts.

4 CELTICS Brad Stevens made his name by squeezing every ounce out of mediocre talent. Now he gets to enjoy maximizing Kyrie Irving and **GORDON HAYWARD**.

5 CAVALIERS LeBron is stuck carrying an aging rotation until Isaiah Thomas is healthy. Small ball should keep things humming, but the reworked Cavs will require patience.



6 BUCKS Giannis Antetokounmpo accelerates like LeBron, dunks like Durant and continuously improves like Kawhi. He's ready to lead Milwaukee to the second round.

7 TIMBERWOLVES The hype wave that engulfed Karl-Anthony Towns last fall was four months premature. A year older (at 21) and wiser, the big man is ready this time.

8 CLIPPERS No Chris Paul means no title contention, but the highlight-reel plays will live on. Blake Griffin should relish being the Man, and Milos Teodosic's passing will have everyone gushing.

9 NUGGETS Nikola Jokic's breakout season transformed Denver into a pass-happy offensive juggernaut overnight. The ball doesn't just move—it teleports.

10 TRAIL BLAZERS Damian Lillard and CJ McCollum bring the sizzle, but the front line was lacking in steak until Jusuf Nurkic arrived last February. The brash 7-footer buoys Portland's playoff hopes.

11 76ERS The highest-variance team on this list due to Joel Embiid's injury history. When their grand franchise center is healthy, frisky Philadelphia is as captivating as any team outside the Bay Area.

12 SPURS Come to appreciate Kawhi Leonard's isolation scoring savvy. Stay to savor the league's most precise and energetic defense.



13 WIZARDS John Wall, Bradley Beal and Otto Porter Jr. are all coming off career years and now have their sights set on the East finals. Can the Wiz count on pristine health for their starters again?

14 PELICANS Born of desperation, the unconventional Twin Towers pairing of Anthony Davis and DeMarcus Cousins will try to make hay in a league of Lilliputians.

15 LAKERS If the dozens of reporters who painstakingly captured his every move at Media Day are any indication, Lonzo Ball will be a full-fledged phenomenon from Day One.

16 HEAT Moxie trumps star power on South Beach these days. Goran Dragic plays until he bleeds, Dion Waiters shoots until his arm falls off, and Erik Spoelstra coaxes top effort from his defense.

17 RAPTORS There's a fine line between familiar and stale. Kyle Lowry, DeMar DeRozan & Co. are approaching the wrong side of that line, even as they crank out winning seasons.

18 JAZZ The NBA's least watchable good team. Rudy Gobert spearheads a pulverizing defense, but Gordon Hayward's defection means that an already clunky attack will regularly stall out.

19 KNICKS Phil, Carmelo and D-Rose were all jettisoned, leaving Kristaps Porzingis as the new King of New York. Unfortunately, the Latvian sensation's bleak court is full of paupers, not princes.

20 GRIZZLIES Nothing can stop Mike Conley and Marc Gasol from getting buckets. But it's just not the same without Zach Randolph and Tony Allen to share in the Grit 'N' Grind.

21 HORNETS Lacking a stabilizing top 20 star, Charlotte has yo-yoed in and out of the playoffs. Gambling on Dwight Howard screams, "What have we got to lose?"

22 SUNS A futile tank job and an empty offseason leaves Phoenix right back where it was a year ago: selling Devin Booker as the future and hoping that his unpolished teammates prove useful.

23 KINGS Watch out, Vlade Divac: Cousins isn't around to blame anymore. Sacramento's shaky front office has built an ill-fitting, underwhelming roster of has-beens and not-yets.

24 NETS Former lottery pick **D'ANGELO RUSSELL** is a rare source of hope for Brooklyn fans, who should finally be able to smile occasionally.

25 MAVERICKS The devastating, pretty offenses built around peak Dirk Nowitzki are gone forever. Deliberate Dallas was the only team to average fewer than 100 points last season.



26 PISTONS New downtown arena, same lackluster vibe. While Stan Van Gundy reshaped his starting lineup, he really needed to detonate the Reggie Jackson–Andre Drummond duo.

27 MAGIC During its perpetual rebuild, Orlando has stumbled upon all sorts of different ways to lose. None has been satisfying in the slightest.

28 HAWKS GM Travis Schlenk took the plunge on reconstruction, and suddenly the Spurs of the East became the Nets of the South: hard-working, anonymous and terrible.

29 PACERS Paul George forced his way out of Indy after years of unsuccessful retooling efforts. Fans are left to pray that Myles Turner grows up quickly.

30 BULLS The Three Alphas era was a miserable failure, so Chicago moved on from Jimmy Butler, Dwyane Wade and Rajon Rondo. The Zero Alphas should be irrelevant until at least 2020. □

GAMES TO WATCH

This season's
appointment viewing

Rockets @ Warriors

Oct. 17, 10:30 p.m.*

Opening night will be a long-distance affair. In four matchups last year the teams combined for one three-point attempt every 40 seconds.

Thunder @ Pacers

Dec. 13, 8 p.m.

Paul George's return to Indy might not be warm and fuzzy. Pay attention, Carmelo: You'll get your own awkward homecoming three days later when OKC invades MSG.

Lakers @ Cavs

Dec. 14, 8 p.m.

LeBron gets his first glimpse at Lonzo's Lakers.

Wizards @ Celtics

Dec. 25, 5:30 p.m.

On Christmas, you can have your goodwill toward men. We'll take the NBA's testiest rivalry.

Warriors @ Cavs

Jan. 15, 8 p.m.

Get your fill: After this showdown, these two won't meet again until early June.

T-Wolves @ 76ers

March 24, 6 p.m.

Millenials running rampant: Embiid. Towns. Simmons. Wiggins. Fultz. Feel good about the NBA's future.

Nets @ Bulls

April 7, 8 p.m.

These bottom-feeders will meet again in Brooklyn two days later. Lottery intrigue is certain to abound!

*All times Eastern



PROJECTED LINEUP 2016-17 STATS

COACH STEVE KERR
(4th season with Warriors)

2016-17 RECORD 67-15
(1st in Pacific)

PG STEPHEN CURRY
25.3 PPG; 6.6 APG; 46.8 FG%; 41.1 3FG%

SG KLAY THOMPSON
22.3 PPG; 3.7 RPG; 46.8 FG%; 41.4 3FG%

SF KEVIN DURANT
25.1 PPG; 8.3 RPG; 53.7 FG%; 37.5 3FG%

PF DRAYMOND GREEN
10.2 PPG; 7.9 RPG; 7.0 APG; 41.8 FG%

C ZAZA PACHULIA
6.1 PPG; 5.9 RPG; 1.9 APG; 53.4 FG%

BENCH

SF ANDRE IGUODALA
7.6 PPG; 4.0 RPG; 3.4 APG; 52.8 FG%

SG NICK YOUNG*
13.2 PPG; 2.3 RPG; 43.0 FG%; 40.4 3FG%

PF DAVID WEST
4.6 PPG; 3.0 RPG; 2.2 APG; 53.6 FG%

● TOP 100 PLAYERS *NEW ACQUISITION



ENEMY LINES

A RIVAL SCOUT SIZES
UP GOLDEN STATE

It's hard to even build a starting All-Star team to match up with them. Mine would be Kyrie Irving, Russell Westbrook, LeBron James, Kawhi Leonard and Giannis Antetokounmpo. Even with those five, I'm not confident. . . . No one has solved their small-ball look: too much versatility on the defensive end, five playmakers on offense. Most teams can't get away with five playmakers because one or two won't be able to guard well enough. The Warriors still don't have a weak link. . . .

KLAY THOMPSON was not bad during the playoffs; he was playing elite defense against great players. What he does for **STEPH CURRY** is priceless. He takes the best perimeter player, whether it's a point guard or a two guard. Plus, even if he's not making shots he's a threat. It's not like you can leave him. . . . **NICK YOUNG** has been a volume shooter his whole career. He won't get those touches, even in the second group. How does he react if they take him out or cut his role? . . . **KEVIN DURANT** bought into the off-ball movement that we hadn't seen in OKC. By the end of the season it looked beautiful. You could tell he was energized by not needing to create every single shot. His defensive intensity and focus were better, and his activity on offense was way better. . . . **DRAYMOND GREEN** was my Defensive Player of the Year. He takes on guards and bigs—that sets him apart. He gets slap steals all the time. . . . The bench guy who excites me the most is **PATRICK MCCAW**. His growth will be important after they lost Ian Clark. He can slash, shoot, score with consistency from the wing.

WESTERN CONFERENCE

WARRIORS

TELLING

91.4

STATISTIC

At the beginning of the decade, the Spurs concocted the most efficient offense in the league, spreading the floor with three-point shooters, exploiting mismatches, moving off the ball movement and picking

defenses apart with the extra pass.

The Warriors use those same principles, only with a twist. San Antonio weaponized smart role players to compensate for an aging nucleus. Steve Kerr uses Hall of Famers at the peak of

their powers.

The result: two titles in three years, with a record 73-win season sandwiched in between.

Expect nothing less in 2017-18: **91.4% of Golden State's offense from last year is returning.** The only significant contributor to depart was backup shooting guard Ian Clark.

Even after a summer of overhauls and all-in plays from other

contenders, the Dubs remain a problem that can't be solved. The more interesting question is how long this run will last and how it might end. Injuries? Egos? Luxury tax bills?

In the meantime, Golden State will continue with Steph Curry, Kevin Durant, Draymond Green and Klay Thompson in their primes, playing basketball in the smartest way possible.

BOTTOM LINE | Barring a major injury, the Warriors Era continues through next June.

PROJECTED LINEUP 2016-17 STATS

COACH MIKE D'ANTONI
(2nd season with Rockets)

2016-17 RECORD 55-27
(2nd in Southwest)

PG CHRIS PAUL*
18.1 PPG; 9.2 APG; 47.6 FG%; 41.1 3FG%

SG JAMES HARDEN
29.1 PPG; 11.2 APG; 44.0 FG%; 34.7 3FG% →

SF TREVOR ARIZA
11.7 PPG; 5.7 RPG; 40.9 FG%; 34.4 3FG%

PF RYAN ANDERSON
13.6 PPG; 4.6 RPG; 41.8 FG%; 40.3 3FG%

C CLINT CAPELA
12.6 PPG; 8.1 RPG; 1.2 BPG; 64.3 FG%

BENCH

SG ERIC GORDON
16.2 PPG; 2.5 APG; 40.6 FG%; 37.2 3FG%

SF LUC MBAH A MOUTE*
6.1 PPG; 2.1 RPG; 50.5 FG%; 39.1 3FG%

C NENÉ
9.1 PPG; 4.2 RPG; 1.0 APG; 61.7 FG%

● THE CROSSOVER TOP 100 RANKING *NEW ACQUISITION



ENEMY LINES

A RIVAL SCOUT SIZES
UP HOUSTON

It's a knee-jerk reaction to think that if you add **CHRIS PAUL**, you can't get worse. But history shows you that if you don't find a way to integrate everything, these moves aren't going to have the desired result. That's one of the big question marks: Are Paul and **JAMES HARDEN** going to be able to mesh? ... Everything last year was predicated on Harden's breaking down the defense, but Paul needs the ball in his hands. It's going to be a big challenge. However, with **MIKE D'ANTONI**, there's so little stress on defense and you get so many possessions in their offense, maybe that's the way you get it done. The more offensive possessions there are, the more satisfied the guys can be. ...

CLINT CAPELA is never going to be a polished offensive player, but that fits the profile of the team: Only a few guys need to have plays run for them. ... There are definite holes in **RYAN ANDERSON**'s game. [But] how many stretch fours out there are good defenders and rebounders? ... The ability of **P.J. TUCKER** to reinvent himself as a shooter at this stage of his career is pretty rare. He's known as a good defender, and in this era of positionless basketball, he's not a wing or a four. He's just a player. ... **LUC MBAH A MOUTE** is a great person and very aggressive defender. These are limited pieces, but personality-wise they can work. You surround your stars with accepting role players. ... **ERIC GORDON** can give you 17 points per game right there. He's so laser-focused as a scorer—I'm gonna get my buckets, I'm gonna draw a foul, I'm gonna use my strength. I'm gonna rise up in your face.

WESTERN CONFERENCE

ROCKETS

TELLING

5.3

STATISTIC

There were nights last year when it looked as if the Rockets had cracked the code to basketball. They let James Harden run wild as a point guard and surrounded him with shooters bombing threes. The Vegas over-

under for last year's Rockets was 41.5 wins. They finished with 55.

The problem was the playoffs—or, more specifically, the Spurs. They ceded the middle of the key, protected the rim and smothered the three-

point line. Houston had no answers.

Enter Chris Paul, the nine-time All-Star point guard from the Clippers. **Paul attempted 5.3 midrange shots per game—just 1.8 fewer than the Rockets averaged.**

He'll not only diversify the offense but also absorb a good amount of Harden's playmaking load to keep the Beard fresh for the stretch run.

That's how it should work in theory, anyway.

Reality could be more complicated for Paul and Harden, two players used to total control of an offense. A year ago the Rockets found a formula for regular-season success that would have kept them relevant for years. And then they traded half the roster to go all-in for something more.

PROJECTED LINEUP 2016-17 STATS

COACH GREGG POPOVICH
(22nd season with Spurs)

2016-17 RECORD 61-21
(1st in Southwest)

PG TONY PARKER
10.1 PPG; 4.5 APG; 46.6 FG%; 33.3 3FG%

SG DANNY GREEN
7.3 PPG; 3.3 RPG; 39.2 FG%; 37.9 3FG%

SF KAWHI LEONARD
25.5 PPG; 5.8 RPG; 48.5 FG%; 38.0 3FG%

PF LAMARCUS ALDRIDGE
17.3 PPG; 7.3 RPG; 1.2 BPG; 47.7 FG%

C PAU GASOL
12.4 PPG; 7.8 RPG; 50.2 FG%; 53.8 3FG%

BENCH

SF RUDY GAY*
18.7 PPG; 6.3 RPG; 45.5 FG%; 37.2 3FG%

SG MANU GINÓBILI
7.5 PPG; 2.7 APG; 39.0 FG%; 39.2 3FG%

PG PATTY MILLS
9.5 PPG; 3.5 APG; 44.0 FG%; 41.4 3FG%

● THE CROSSOVER TOP 100 RANKING *NEW ACQUISITION

ENEMY LINES

A RIVAL SCOUT SIZES
UP SAN ANTONIO

KAWHI LEONARD is an ideal winner: a guy who knows when to step up and when to accept the development of other players around him. . . . They made minimal changes this offseason, but I think that almost

works to their advantage, just having a year-to-year understanding. They're almost in a class by themselves because of that. I look at matchups against them and I still don't feel completely comfortable. They could have eight guys averaging between eight and 18 points. . . . We look at the average, but

PAU GASOL understands when he needs to score 22 points on a given night. I was watching Pau at EuroBasket—this guy just gets it. . . . **RUDY GAY** is such a maligned player. There aren't many guys who score so effortlessly and get less respect. I don't think it's a huge request for him to compromise his offense and fit in. He's not a rabble-rouser. He's a good dude. I just get the feeling he will accept his role and take his foot off the accelerator a bit—kind of like Kevin Martin. . . . Certainly **TONY PARKER**'s leadership is critical, but they've got players who will be able to make up for his absence [due to an injury that could sideline him until November]. That will benefit them in the long run, conditioning those players to look for other aspects of their game. . . . **KYLE ANDERSON** has his limitations, but he can pass. He's got a really good feel for the game. . . . **DEJOUNTE MURRAY** is a great raw, individual talent.



WESTERN CONFERENCE

SPURS

TELLING

31.6

STATISTIC

LaMarcus Aldridge saw his numbers dip across the board last year. Pau Gasol is well into the twilight of his career. Manu Ginóbili played just 18.7 minutes a game. Tony Parker is recovering from a torn left quadriceps.

Rudy Gay is arriving after four lost years in Sacramento with an ailing Achilles. Even San Antonio's free agents are aging and nursing injuries. It may not matter. If the Spurs have more questions than ever, they also have the single best

answer since Tim Duncan in his prime. Kawhi Leonard was a stabilizing force throughout San Antonio's season, and before Zaza Pachulia's size 17 shoe ended his playoff run, Leonard was playing the best ball of his life. After putting up a career-high efficiency rating of 27.6, **Leonard's postseason PER of 31.6 was the best in the league.** His offense

has become as dominant as his D. With a combination of brute strength, flawless footwork and tightly coiled athleticism, Leonard is in a class with LeBron, Durant, Curry—and that might be it. He will be asked to do more this season, and if he is up to the task—and isn't slowed by the quadriceps injury that cut into his preseason—he could very well walk away with an MVP award.



PROJECTED LINEUP 2016-17 STATS

COACH BILLY DONOVAN
(3rd season with Thunder)

2016-17 RECORD 47-35
(2nd in Northwest)

PG RUSSELL WESTBROOK
31.6 PPG; 10.7 RPG; 10.4 APG; 42.5 FG%

SG ANDRE ROBERSON
6.6 PPG; 5.1 RPG; 1.2 SPG; 46.4 FG%

SF PAUL GEORGE*
23.7 PPG; 6.6 RPG; 46.1 FG%; 39.3 3FG% →

PF CARMELO ANTHONY*
22.4 PPG; 5.9 RPG; 43.3 FG%; 35.9 FG%

C STEVEN ADAMS
11.3 PPG; 7.7 RPG; 1.0 BPG; 57.1 FG%

BENCH

PG RAYMOND FELTON*
6.7 PPG; 2.7 RPG; 2.4 APG; 43.0 FG%

PF PATRICK PATTERSON*
6.8 PPG; 4.5 RPG; 40.1 FG%; 37.2 3FG%

SG ALEX ABRINES
6.0 PPG; 1.3 RPG; 39.3 FG%; 38.1 3FG%

● THE CROSSOVER TOP 100 RANKING *NEW ACQUISITION



ENEMY LINES

A RIVAL SCOUT SIZES
UP OKLAHOMA CITY

I'm lukewarm about them even after the **CARMELO ANTHONY** trade. Last year they were three pieces away. Now they're still one piece away. **PAUL GEORGE** and Anthony will make **RUSSELL WESTBROOK**'s life easier, but they still need one more two-way wing to match up with the best teams. . . . George will be getting squeezed from both sides because Anthony is going to take lots of shots. If Anthony doesn't get them, he'll check out and the whole plan will fall apart. I could see them trading George before the deadline if the chemistry doesn't click. . . . I think Westbrook will be the back-to-back MVP. He's not that traditional pass-first guy, but he attracts so much attention that everyone else benefits. His aggressiveness sets them up. . . . **ANDRE ROBERSON** is a very good defensive player, but he kills an offense. We'll be here in five years waiting for him to learn to shoot a basic jump shot. . . . There are some matchups where **STEVEN ADAMS** is at risk because he's a traditional center, but he gets by better than most 7-footers. He stays very busy on the offensive glass, which helps a lot. . . . **PATRICK PATTERSON** is a glue guy, but he can't make plays for you in the playoffs. He will disappear. . . . **RAYMOND FELTON** is really important for them. I can see them playing him with Westbrook just to balance the load and make sure that Felton can help keep George involved offensively. . . . Their bench is just specialty guys who make you cringe when they're on the court. **JERAMI GRANT** is fun in transition but worthless in a half-court game. **KYLE SINGLER** is making good money to wave a towel.

WESTERN CONFERENCE

THUNDER

TELLING

5 of 18

STATISTIC

Russell Westbrook's Year of Vengeance ended the only way possible: With the MVP firing a hail of long-range missiles. In the finale of a 4-1 defeat to the Rockets in the first round, **Westbrook put up 18 threes** (and made just five). That playoff series was a reminder that while Westbrook became the most reliably breathtaking performer in the league last season, his one-man act wasn't sustainable. Now we'll see what the

triple double terror can do with help.

In June the Thunder swapped Victor Oladipo and Domantas Sabonis for Paul George; three months later they flipped Enes Kanter and Doug McDermott for Carmelo Anthony. With the All-Star acquisitions come new issues: Will there be enough shots to go around? Can Westbrook keep his fellow

stars (and himself) happy?

Oklahoma City looks as loaded as any team outside of Golden State—don't forget Steven Adams and Andre Roberson anchoring the defense—and the goal should be the conference finals. Westbrook's rampage was must-see basketball last season; this summer's pickups and plot twists make the Thunder even more riveting.

BOTTOM LINE | If they have any hope of unseating Golden State, they're going to have to learn to share like the Dubs.

PROJECTED LINEUP 2016-17 STATS

COACH TOM THIBODEAU
(2nd season with Timberwolves)

2016-17 RECORD 31-51
(5th in Northwest)

PG	JEFF TEAGUE*
55	15.3 PPG; 7.8 APG; 44.2 FG%; 35.7 3FG%
SG	JIMMY BUTLER*
11	23.9 PPG; 6.2 RPG; 5.5 APG; 45.5 FG%
SF	ANDREW WIGGINS
50	23.6 PPG; 4.0 RPG; 45.2 FG%; 35.6 3FG% →
PF	TAJ GIBSON*
95	10.8 PPG; 6.2 RPG; 0.8 BPG; 51.5 FG%
C	KARL-ANTHONY TOWNS
14	25.1 PPG; 12.3 RPG; 54.2 FG%; 36.7 3FG%
BENCH	
SG	JAMAL CRAWFORD*
	12.3 PPG; 2.6 APG; 41.3 FG%; 36.0 3FG%
PF	GORGUI DIENG
	10.0 PPG; 7.9 RPG; 1.2 BPG; 50.2 FG%
SF	NEMANJA BJELICA
	6.2 PPG; 3.8 RPG; 1.2 APG; 42.4 FG%

● THE CROSSOVER TOP 100 RANKING *NEW ACQUISITION

ENEMY LINES

A RIVAL SCOUT SIZES
UP MINNESOTA

I wonder about their shooting a lot. Their main perimeter guys—**JIMMY BUTLER**, **ANDREW WIGGINS** and **JEFF TEAGUE**—aren't great shooters, and they don't have a stretch four that I really trust. Spacing issues are bound to pop up. I wonder if they have all the right pieces to play **TOM THIBODEAU**'s grind-it-out style—and whether that style will even work against tougher competition in the West. . . . They have too much hype for the second straight season. I worry how their younger players handle that if things start to go sideways again. . . . Butler and **KARL-ANTHONY TOWNS** is a phenomenal pairing, but I question how well everyone else meshes with them. It starts with Wiggins. He needs the ball and wants to play isolation and slash. He's a worse and younger version of Butler. Wiggins's physical talent is undeniable, but can he adjust in major ways to be a complementary guy? . . . Teague isn't a huge step forward from Ricky Rubio, but I can see why they moved on after losing so many close games last year. Having a point guard who commands some respect with his shot is easier to work with. . . . Towns is a monster—shooting, range, length, power, polish. Total package. I'd rather have him offensively than Anthony Davis. Defensively, he needs to be a center, and that could still take some time. . . . I think Thibodeau will be most comfortable playing **TAJ GIBSON** with Towns down the stretch. Starting and finishing big. Thibodeau needs to prove he can adapt with the times. Most of the best teams in the West close with one big, not two.

WESTERN CONFERENCE

TIMBERWOLVES

TELLING

13

STATISTIC

Shooting guard Jimmy Butler deserved more credit than he got for averaging 23.9 points, 6.2 rebounds and 5.5 assists while dragging a miserable Chicago team to the playoffs last year. Meanwhile, Karl-Anthony Towns flashed talent

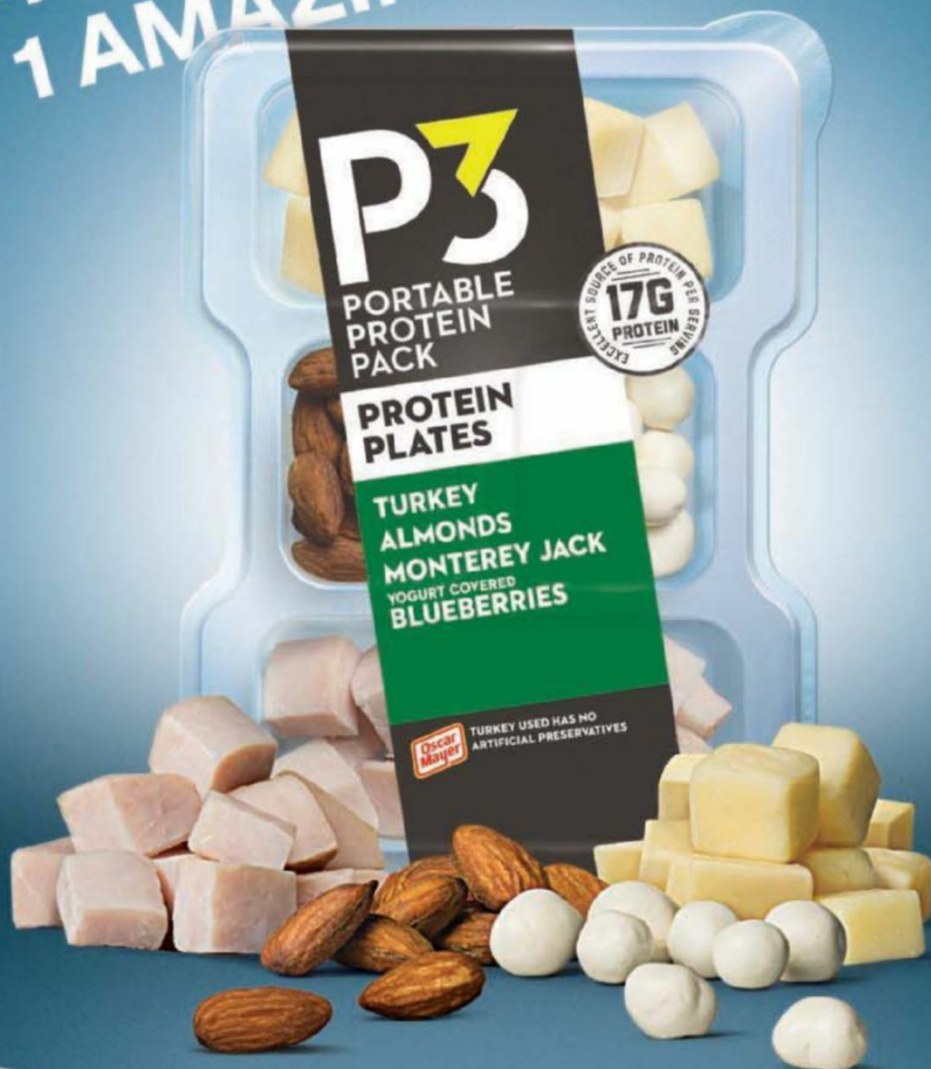
seldom seen from a second-year big man. Sadly, just as the Bulls' misery obscured Butler's brilliance, most fans had checked out on the Timberwolves by the All-Star break, after which Towns began putting up 28.4 points

on 59.7% shooting with 13.4 rebounds.

Now they're both in Minnesota, ready to make the whole league pay attention to a franchise that has **missed the playoffs 13 years in a row**, two shy of the longest drought in NBA history. Last season Towns, Andrew Wiggins and new coach Tom Thibodeau were supposed to bring the T-Wolves back to life. They won 31 games.

While skepticism is understandable, the 28-year-old Butler will be even better than advertised, and he wasn't the only veteran acquisition; 6'9" Taj Gibson and Jeff Teague, who replaces Ricky Rubio at the point, should improve execution on both ends. If Towns and Wiggins can make progress on D, there is too much talent for the streak of futility to continue.

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FIND IT
IN THE
MEAT
CASE

PROJECTED LINEUP 2016-17 STATS

COACH TERRY STOTTS
(6th season with Trail Blazers)

2016-17 RECORD 41-41
(3rd in Northwest)

PG DAMIAN LILLARD
27.0 PPG; 5.9 APG; 44.4 FG%; 37.0 3FG%

SG CJ MCCOLLUM
23.0 PPG; 3.6 APG; 48.0 FG%; 42.1 3FG% →

SF MOE HARKLESS
10.0 PPG; 4.4 RPG; 50.3 FG%; 35.1 3FG%

PF AL-FAROUQ AMINU
8.7 PPG; 7.4 RPG; 39.3 FG%; 33.0 3FG%

C JUSUF NURKIC
15.2 PPG; 10.4 RPG; 1.9 BPG; 50.8 FG%

BENCH

SG EVAN TURNER
9.0 PPG; 3.8 RPG; 3.2 APG; 42.6 FG%

PF ED DAVIS
4.3 PPG; 5.3 RPG; 0.5 BPG; 52.8 FG%

PG SHABAZZ NAPIER
4.1 PPG; 1.3 APG; 39.9 FG%; 37.0 3FG%

● THE CROSSEOVER TOP 100 RANKING

ENEMY LINES

A RIVAL SCOUT SIZES
UP PORTLAND

They had a really quiet summer. Their continuity should help them get a fast start, and they showed they could play winning basketball after the **JUSUF NURKIC** trade. . . . I don't think the Allen Crabbe [trade to the Nets] is addition by subtraction. It's just subtraction. There are more minutes and clearer roles for **MOE HARKLESS** and **EVAN TURNER**, but they needed Crabbe's shooting. It's O.K. to overpay for shooting, and he was part of their best five-man lineup. . . . **DAMIAN LILLARD** doesn't have any weaknesses on offense. He hits big shots, runs an efficient offense, shoots from deep, he's a caretaker. It's all on his shoulders. . . . Lillard deserves a lot of credit for finding a good balance with **CJ MCCOLLUM**; there's no real jealousy or push-and-pull between the two of them. It's seamless how they play off each other. They both get naturally more aggressive when the other one is on the bench. . . . McCollum's midrange game is a big-time weapon. His handle and his craftiness and his ability to play in pick-and-rolls are all pluses—he can score at all three levels. He can hit you at any moment. . . . All the concerns about Turner's fit came to fruition. He kills their spacing both for the guards and around Nurkic inside. There's nowhere to hide him. His contract is so, so bad. . . . It's never going to happen for **MEYERS LEONARD**. He doesn't believe in himself, so why should anyone believe in him? . . . **ZACH COLLINS** was struggling everywhere in Summer League. Even when he improves, I'm not sure he has a position. That looks like a bad pick.

WESTERN CONFERENCE

TRAIL BLAZERS

TELLING

14-5

STATISTIC

The Blazers are coming off a second straight year in which they struggled initially, then made a successful playoff push in the final few months.

Help arrived last season on Feb. 12, after a trade with the Nuggets: 7-foot, 280-pound

Jusuf (the Bosnian Beast) Nurkic, who's both a brick wall when setting picks for Damian Lillard and CJ McCollum and a surprisingly nimble receiver on rolls to the rim. In addition to making the offense harder to guard,

he provided double-digit rebounds and an anchor to the defense.

The acquisition of Nurkic unlocked some of the best basketball of the Lillard era: Portland was **14-5 with Nurkic** in the starting lineup.

Is the Blazers' late-season winning percentage sustainable? The 23-year-old Nurkic will be playing for a new contract, but he still has much to prove: While

he averaged 15.2 points in 29.2 minutes for Portland, he had put up just 8.0 points in 17.9 minutes before. And Nurkic's presence can't entirely make up for the deficiencies of Lillard and McCollum on D: Portland was just 23rd in defensive rating.

But even if the Blazers start slowly, the past two years suggest they can make up ground quickly.

PROJECTED LINEUP 2016-17 STATS

COACH **DOC RIVERS**

(5th season with Clippers)

2016-17 RECORD **51-31**

(2nd in Pacific)

PG **PATRICK BEVERLEY***
9.5 PPG; 4.2 APG; 42.0 FG%; 38.2 3FG%

SG **AUSTIN RIVERS**
12.0 PPG; 2.8 APG; 44.2 FG%; 37.1 3FG%

SF **DANILO GALLINARI***
18.2 PPG; 5.2 RPG; 44.7 FG%; 38.9 3FG%

PF **BLAKE GRIFFIN**
21.6 PPG; 8.1 RPG; 4.9 APG; 49.3 FG%

C **DEANDRE JORDAN**
12.7 PPG; 13.8 RPG; 1.7 BPG; 71.4 FG%

BENCH

SG **LOU WILLIAMS***
17.5 PPG; 3.0 APG; 42.9 FG%; 36.5 3FG%

SF **SAM DEKKER***
6.5 PPG; 3.7 RPG; 47.3 FG%; 32.1 3FG%

PF **MONTREZL HARRELL***
9.1 PPG; 3.8 RPG; 1.1 APG; 65.2 FG%

● THE CROSSOVER TOP 100 RANKING *NEW ACQUISITION



ENEMY LINES

A RIVAL SCOUT SIZES
UP LOS ANGELES

They will look more different this year compared to last year than any team in the league. . . . For years their biggest problems have been small forward and depth. They solved those by adding **DANILO GALLINARI** and improving their bench, but losing Chris Paul creates an even bigger problem. . . . **PATRICK BEVERLEY**'s life is about to change. It's a big drop from playing with James Harden to playing with **AUSTIN RIVERS**. He will be exposed offensively. He's better as a spot-up guy, but it's hard to do that playing off Rivers. . . . **BLAKE GRIFFIN** has been slipping athletically. They just committed to a [five-year, \$173 million] contract that says, "We need you to be better than you've ever been before." I'm not sure he can do that. It's going to be a lot harder with defenses keying on him. . . . **DEANDRE JORDAN** will miss Paul more than anybody. He's depended on him for his offense for most of his career. They definitely should look at trading Jordan before the deadline. . . . **MILOS TEODOSIC** is a magician with the ball and a matador on defense. Late in games, I could see them going to offense/defense substitutions with their point guards, swapping him and Beverley in and out. . . . If Gallinari has to play most of his minutes at small forward, he'll find it harder to exploit matchups. But they'll have a hard time going smaller with Griffin at center and Gallinari at power forward because both guys will struggle defensively. . . . **LOU WILLIAMS** needs to have a huge year for them. He's going to have a major, major responsibility as a scorer.

WESTERN CONFERENCE

CLIPPERS

TELLING

11-18

STATISTIC

Though he has struggled with injuries in recent years, Blake Griffin has played like an All-Star anytime he has been healthy. Over seven seasons he has enhanced his skill set with more passing and better shooting, including a

career-high 76.0% from the line last season.

Yet as great as Griffin is, every now and then his game transforms from "more athletic Karl Malone" into something even greater. His creativity from the high post turns defenses

inside out, his pure shooting touch keeps defenders off-balance, and his combination of explosion and body control makes him unstoppable on the break.

With Chris Paul in Houston now, playmaking, ankle-breaking Super Blake is going to have to become a regular in Los Angeles; **over the past two seasons, the Clippers are 11-18 without Paul.** A good

sign: Last season Griffin averaged 23.2 points and 6.4 assists per 36 minutes when Paul was off the floor, versus 22.7 and 4.8 when Paul was playing.

Danilo Gallinari will stretch defenses and Patrick Beverley will be a workplace hazard for opposing point guards. But the Clippers' fate will be decided by how often Super Blake shows up.

BOTTOM LINE | Griffin's good enough to carry them to the playoffs if he's healthy. If not, this year could get dark.

PROJECTED LINEUP 2016-17 STATS

COACH QUIN SNYDER
(4th season with Jazz)

2016-17 RECORD 51-31
(1st in Northwest)

PG	RICKY RUBIO*
61	11.1 PPG; 9.1 APG; 1.7 SPG; 40.2 FG%
SG	RODNEY HOOD
87	12.7 PPG; 3.4 RPG; 40.8 FG%; 37.1 3FG%
SF	JOE INGLES
	7.1 PPG; 3.2 RPG; 45.2 FG%; 44.1 3FG%
PF	DERRICK FAVORS
67	9.5 PPG; 6.1 RPG; 0.8 BPG; 48.7 FG%
C	RUDY GOBERT
15	14.0 PPG; 12.8 RPG; 2.6 BPG; 66.1 FG%

BENCH

SF	JOE JOHNSON
	9.2 PPG; 3.1 RPG; 43.6 FG%; 41.1 3FG%
PG	DANTE EXUM
	6.2 PPG; 1.7 APG; 42.7 FG%; 29.5 3FG%
PF	JONAS JEREBKO*
	3.8 PPG; 3.5 RPG; 43.5 FG%; 34.6 3FG%

● THE CROSSOVER TOP 100 RANKING *NEW ACQUISITION



ENEMY LINES

A RIVAL SCOUT SIZES
UP UTAH

They're a slow, low-possession, clock-control team that prides itself on defense, toughness and making the other team's life miserable. They can be the best defensive team in the league, and with an average offense—that puts them into the playoffs for sure. . . .

RODNEY HOOD is their x-factor. They absolutely need him to take that big jump to fill Gordon Hayward's shoes. The opportunity and timing are great. They don't need him to score 30; they grind out wins and just need him to get it done late in games. Hood definitely has more to his offensive game than he's shown. He's confident and patient on the ball, he can run some pick-and-roll, and he can shoot. . . .

I like the fit for **RICKY RUBIO**. They play to his strengths by emphasizing defense—he's strong on the ball—and they aren't a team that absolutely needs shooting from his spot. That said, some of Minnesota's late-game struggles could travel with him. He'll help keep their ball movement up in the half-court and he should pair well with **RUDY GOBERT** on pick-and-roll. . . . **DERRICK FAVORS** probably needs to get traded to a team where he can be the starting center rather than a guy who splits times at two positions and winds up stuck in mismatches. . . .

DONOVAN MITCHELL was the most impressive rookie at Summer League. He's crazy long for a two guard. . . . Another reason they might be better than people think is that Hood, Favors, **DANTE EXUM** and **ALEC BURKS** all underperformed last year, mostly due to injury. Give them average health, and all of those guys are quality contributors.

WESTERN CONFERENCE

JAZZ

TELLING

8.1

STATISTIC

For almost any other young team trying to make progress in the crowded West, having a young player such as Gordon Hayward leave as a free agent would have been devastating. Hayward was the face of the Jazz—the scorer, the closer, the

team's lone All-Star since Deron Williams six years ago.

But Rudy Gobert was Utah's rock. At 7'1" with an eight-foot wingspan, Gobert spent 2016-17 harassing shooters like a science fiction villain, gliding from the rim

to the three-point line and back. Utah broke through last season—winning 51 games, its first division title in a decade and a first-round series win over the Clippers—because of his progress, not Hayward's. Gobert led the league in blocks per game (2.6) and was second in defensive rating (99.2). The Jazz

outscored opponents by 8.1 points per 100 possessions when Gobert was on the floor.

Rodney Hood, Joe Johnson, Dante Exum, Joe Ingles and a healthier Derrick Favors will make up for Hayward's scoring. Ricky Rubio will take over as playmaker. The Jazz be a work in progress. But in the 25-year-old Gobert, they still have a cornerstone to build on.

PROJECTED LINEUP 2016-17 STATS

COACH MICHAEL MALONE
(3rd season with Nuggets)

2016-17 RECORD 40-42
(4th in Northwest)

PG JAMAL MURRAY
9.9 PPG; 2.1 APG; 40.4 FG%; 33.4 3FG%

SG GARY HARRIS
14.9 PPG; 2.9 APG; 50.2 FG%; 42.0 3FG%

SF WILSON CHANDLER
15.7 PPG; 6.5 RPG; 46.1 FG%; 33.7 3FG%

PF PAUL MILLSAP*
18.1 PPG; 7.7 RPG; 3.7 APG; 44.2 FG%

C NIKOLA JOKIC
16.7 PPG; 9.8 RPG; 4.9 APG; 57.8 FG%

BENCH

SG WILL BARTON
13.7 PPG; 3.4 APG; 44.3 FG%; 37.0 3FG%

PG EMMANUEL MUDIAY
11.0 PPG; 3.9 APG; 37.7 FG%; 31.5 3FG%

C MASON PLUMLEE
10.4 PPG; 7.5 RPG; 3.5 APG; 53.6 FG%

● THE CROSSOVER TOP 100 RANKING *NEW ACQUISITION

ENEMY LINES

A RIVAL SCOUT SIZES
UP DENVER

MICHAEL MALONE is on the hot seat. They have expectations this year after they spent the money on **PAUL MILLSAP**. The front office hasn't done Malone that many favors with the roster composition. It always seems like they're stockpiling power forwards. . . . That said, their best five-man lineup is really intriguing and well-balanced: Millsap, **JAMAL MURRAY**, **GARY HARRIS**, **WILSON CHANDLER** and **NIKOLA JOKIC**. . . . I like Chandler better as a power forward than a small forward, so they're still a wing or two away. I like him as an isolation scorer, but I don't think he's the best spacing option at the small forward. . . . Jokic is so, so skilled with his passing and scoring efficiency. He impacts his team's attitude like a point guard. I question his ceiling as a star because I don't think he'll ever be able to be an impact defender with his size and trouble covering ground. . . . Signing Millsap was the biggest move they've made in years. He should play really well off Jokic offensively because he's unselfish, he can score, he moves well and he's smart. . . . Harris is a hidden gem. Great cutter, great shooter, can guard both backcourt spots. . . . It's time to take the training wheels off Murray. I actually think he has more long-term All-Star potential than Jokic because he fits how the point guard spot is being played, with his shooting range and off-the-dribble threes. He will be a really tough cover once he grows up. . . . It's easy to forget **EMMANUEL MUDIAY** exists, he had such a bad season. He's probably best as a third guard where he can just focus on his own scoring.

WESTERN CONFERENCE

NUGGETS

TELLING

30

STATISTIC

The Nuggets have the best offense this side of the Warriors, they have the most exciting young big man this side of Karl-Anthony Towns and Kristaps Porzingis, and they signed one of the most productive two-way power forwards of the past five years. It's time for them to start winning. Nikola Jokic, 22, is the catalyst. He's either an oversized Magic Johnson or a 21st-century version of Arvydas Sabonis, a 6' 11" center with a deep bag of tricks

as a scorer and passer. His arrival—coupled with the emergence of 23-year-old shooting guard Gary Harris—brought Denver alive last year.

For those who missed it (and there were plenty who did), the Nuggets dazzled fans over the final two months of the season, averaging 114.4 points to come within a game of the playoffs. Then in July they gave a three-year,

\$90 million deal to Hawks free agent Paul Millsap, who'll slide in next to Jokic and shore up the defense.

Jokic & Co. are still waiting on national recognition, as well as local: **Denver ranked 30th in the league in attendance**, averaging 14,770 fans per game. But as Golden State showed, a team that shares the ball and piles up points—and wins—can build a following quickly.

BOTTOM LINE | Jokic makes every game worth watching, but they need to prove more before we put them in the playoffs.

PROJECTED LINEUP 2016-17 STATS

COACH DAVID FIZDALE
(2nd season with Grizzlies)

2016-17 RECORD 43-39
(3rd in Southwest)

PG MIKE CONLEY
20.5 PPG; 6.3 APG; 46.0 FG%; 40.8 3FG%

SG BEN MCLEMORE*
8.1 PPG; 2.1 RPG; 43.0 FG%; 38.2 3FG%

SF CHANDLER PARSONS
6.2 PPG; 2.5 RPG; 33.8 FG%; 26.9 3FG%

PF JAMYCHAL GREEN
8.9 PPG; 7.1 RPG; 50.0 FG%; 37.9 3FG%

C MARC GASOL
19.5 PPG; 6.3 RPG; 45.9 FG%; 38.8 3FG%

BENCH

SG TYREKE EVANS*
10.3 PPG; 3.1 APG; 40.5 FG%; 35.6 3FG%

SG WAYNE SELDEN
5.1 PPG; 0.9 APG; 43.1 FG%; 25.0 3FG%

C BRANDAN WRIGHT
6.8 PPG; 2.8 RPG; 0.7 BPG; 61.5 FG%

● THE CROSSOVER TOP 100 RANKING *NEW ACQUISITION



ENEMY LINES

A RIVAL SCOUT SIZES
UP MEMPHIS

MARC GASOL is such a fun guy to watch because he's got no athletic superiority whatsoever. What he's become is a huge credit to him. . . . It's been hard for **MIKE CONLEY** to penetrate the top tiers of point guards. It's a little telling that he's never been an All-Star. At what point does his game flatten out? Conley is going to be 30 and coming off his career high in scoring. And I'm not saying it's an unwilling 20 points per game, but that's more than three points higher than any season before. Do we really expect him to go to a higher level? You've got Kyrie Irving and Damian Lillard out there—guys who play with such flair and scoring bravado. I never saw Conley as that guy. Maybe that's because of the talent around him or the defense-first mentality there, but maybe it says something about him. . . . **TYREKE EVANS**—there's some individual talent, but it can be hard to blend a ball-dominant player like that. There's a certain fear that he could go off for 30 points at any time, but is that going to be in a winning effort? . . . Whenever you've got a guy who's got the physical tools that **BEN MCLEMORE** has and who has demonstrated he can be a threat from the perimeter, you're tantalized. You give him the opportunity because physically he has stuff that other guys will never have. . . . **JAMYCHAL GREEN** was given the perfect opportunity to shine and took advantage of it. There's just nothing special. I don't see a continual developmental curve. He's an accepting role player, but I don't think he's perched on the ledge to move up in the league.

WESTERN CONFERENCE

GRIZZLIES

TELLING

17

STATISTIC

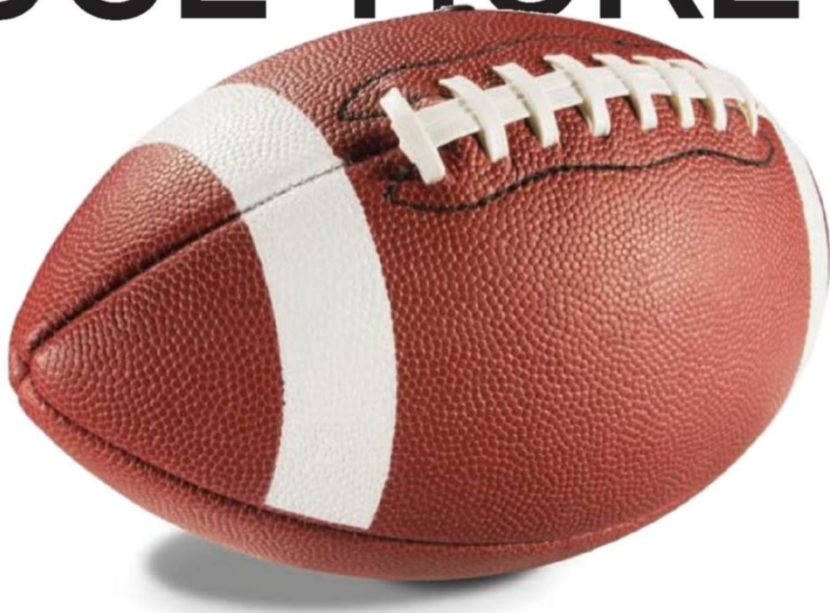
In late November the Grizzlies were in fifth place in the West, one of the season's early surprises. Then 6'1", 175-pound Mike Conley tried to take a charge against 6'7", 232-pound Hornets forward Michael Kidd-Gilchrist. Conley got the

call, but he stayed on the floor; he had broken multiple bones in his lower back. He was projected to miss six to eight weeks, which supposedly spelled doom for Memphis's season. But **Conley's broken back sidelined**

him for only 17 days. The Grizzlies went 7-2 in his absence; when he returned, Conley not only led them to the playoffs but also topped 20 points per game for the first time in his 10-year career. Call it a Grit 'N' Grind parable. It's relevant now because the Grizzlies once again face daunting questions. Can anyone besides Conley and Marc Gasol shoot? (Memphis was

last in field goal percentage.) Can Tyreke Evans help? Will Chandler Parsons—in the second year of a four-year, \$94 million deal—play more than 50 games, and if so, will he average more than six points? It's fair to be skeptical. In the supercharged West, the Grizzlies look like prime candidates to take a step back. But we've been hearing that for a long time—including last season.

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PROJECTED LINEUP 2016-17 STATS

COACH ALVIN GENTRY
(3rd season with Pelicans)

2016-17 RECORD 34-48
(4th in Southwest)

PG RAJON RONDO*
7.8 PPG; 6.7 APG; 1.4 SPG; 40.8 FG%

SG JRUE HOLIDAY
15.4 PPG; 7.3 APG; 45.4 FG%; 35.6 3FG%

SF DANTE CUNNINGHAM
6.6 PPG; 4.2 RPG; 48.5 FG%; 39.2 3FG%

PF ANTHONY DAVIS
28.0 PPG; 11.8 RPG; 2.2 BPG; 50.5 FG%

C DEMARCUS COUSINS
27.0 PPG; 11.0 RPG; 4.6 APG; 45.2 FG%

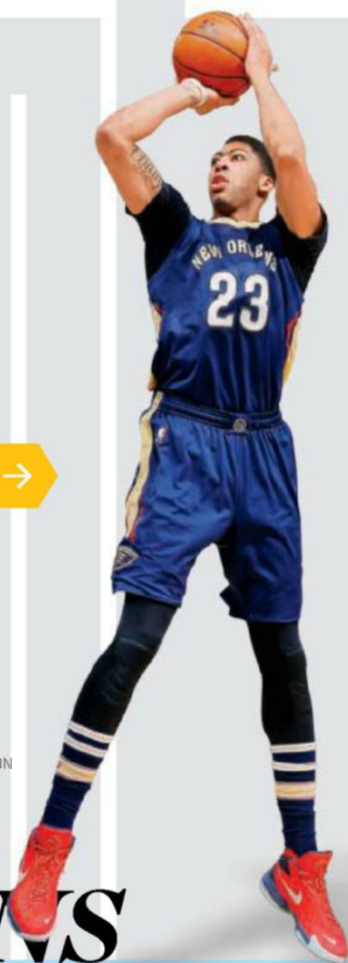
BENCH

PG JORDAN CRAWFORD
14.1 PPG; 3.0 APG; 48.2 FG%; 38.9 3FG%

SG E'TWAUN MOORE
9.6 PPG; 2.2 APG; 45.7 FG%; 37.0 3FG%

C ALEXIS AJINCA
5.3 PPG; 4.5 RPG; 0.6 BPG; 50.0 FG%

● THE CROSSOVER TOP 100 RANKING *NEW ACQUISITION



ENEMY LINES

A RIVAL SCOUT SIZES
UP NEW ORLEANS

After the **DEMARCUS COUSINS** trade I looked at their lineup and thought, "Oh, my God, we've gotta play *them*? We've gotta play against *that* frontcourt?" But there's so much more to the game than individual talent. I think this team needs to learn how to win first. It's an identity thing. The teams above them in the pecking order clearly have that understanding. . . . If Cousins and **RAJON RONDO** are on the same page, that dynamic could click. I don't really see **JRUE HOLIDAY** as a guy who's running your team. So if Rondo can do that while playing with Holiday and he's also [in sync] with Cousins, that's something to fear. . . . The wing rotation maybe has a chance if Holiday can sustain 33, 34 minutes a game. But it's going to take a lot of development, and a lot of things are going to have to correct themselves for that to happen. There's such a lack of fear for opponents as far as these wings are concerned. . . . Cousins does so many things well. He can pass the ball too. **ANTHONY DAVIS** as a face-up shooter has become so good. But your team is not just two twin towers that are remarkably versatile. It's the integration of all that individual talent. Is it Rondo who's going to pull that off? Is he going to be on the court long enough? Is he going to connect with everyone? . . . I'd love to see Davis playing with a Chris Paul type. Davis does so many things well as a finesse player. There's not a lot of power to his game. Is there enough grit and toughness? He's got such great length, but I want to see him play with a top backcourt player.

WESTERN CONFERENCE

PELICANS

TELLING

394

STATISTIC

When All-Star weekend ended with the blockbuster that sent DeMarcus Cousins from the Kings to the Pelicans, the deal was celebrated as a major win for a New Orleans franchise that desperately needed one. Then the games began, and the pairing of bigs Cousins and Anthony Davis was awkward. If the aim of the trade was a playoff push, it didn't work. While the Pelicans were 7-10 in games with both All-Stars in the lineup, it's too early to

write off their partnership after just **394 minutes, which is how long Cousins and Davis were on the floor together.** With more time to get acclimated and more time for Alvin Gentry to tinker with his playbook, there's every chance this team could unlock something much better. They have to stay healthy. Jrue Holiday has averaged 51.5 games over the past

four seasons, and small forwards have failed to stay on the court for long. Tony Allen will help off the bench, but he still can't shoot. And Rajon Rondo is now in NOLA to continue his quest to become the picture they put next to the word *mercurial* in every dictionary. It's a strange group. But until we see more of Cousins and Davis, it's a mix that can't yet be dismissed.

BOTTOM LINE | The Pelicans could be the biggest surprise in the West—or they could be fielding trade offers for Cousins by Christmas.

PROJECTED LINEUP 2016-17 STATS

COACH RICK CARLISLE
(10th season with Mavericks)

2016-17 RECORD 33-49
(5th in Southwest)

PG DENNIS SMITH JR. (R)
18.1 PPG; 6.2 APG; 45.5 FG%; 35.9 3FG%

SG SETH CURRY
12.8 PPG; 2.7 APG; 48.1 FG%; 42.5 3FG%

SF WESLEY MATTHEWS
13.5 PPG; 3.5 RPG; 39.3 FG%; 36.6 3FG%

PF HARRISON BARNES
19.2 PPG; 5.0 RPG; 46.8 FG%; 35.1 3FG%

C DIRK NOWITZKI
14.2 PPG; 6.5 RPG; 43.7 FG%; 37.8 3FG%

BENCH

PG DEVIN HARRIS
6.7 PPG; 2.1 APG; 39.9 FG%; 32.8 3FG%

C NERLENS NOEL
8.7 PPG; 5.8 RPG; 1.0 BPG; 59.5 FG%

SF DORIAN FINNEY-SMITH
4.3 PPG; 2.7 RPG; 37.2 FG%; 29.3 3FG%

● THE CROSSTOVERTOP 100 RANKING (R) ROOKIE, COLLEGE STATS



ENEMY LINES

A RIVAL SCOUT SIZES
UP DALLAS

A successful season will be linked closely with the play of **DENNIS SMITH**. After the draft there were some question marks about him. Was he the right guy to take? Is he going to start? But at Summer League, everyone saw that he can play at that level. If he can develop quickly, he could be a top 30 player by his second year. This is a star-centric league, and they need a star. . . . NBA coaches like to be safe. If anything holds back Smith, it could be that. **VOGI FERRELL** is a safe player. **SETH CURRY** is a safe player. **J.J. BAREA** is a safe player. Smith is more like a wild card that could win a lot of pots for you. . . . I don't see **HARRISON BARNES** as a willing alpha. It hasn't been his personality, going back to high school. He's not a great passer. He's not a great rebounder. He's a decent defender. I just don't see him with that dog in him, and he doesn't really fill a stat sheet. . . . **DIRK NOWITZKI** is a watered-down version of what he used to be. We do player comps and say that some other guy plays like Dirk, but like a bad version of Dirk. That's almost what he is now. I think you have to keep him on the floor 24 to 28 minutes a game—it's not as if there are better options. I don't think Dirk has some understudy on the roster. . . . **NERLENS NOEL** is so limited offensively. He can hit a face-up jump shot once in a while, but nothing is effortless for him. He needs a major polish upgrade. . . . **WESLEY MATTHEWS** is a good player. He hits jump shots, he can score, he's a decent defender. But when I'm game-planning, I'm not worried about him.

WESTERN CONFERENCE

MAVERICKS

TELLING

97.9

STATISTIC

It was only a few years ago that Dallas was blinding with offense. Rick Carlisle blended an ageless Dirk Nowitzki with journeymen (Monta Ellis, Vince Carter, Shawn Marion), and they surprised the whole league. Those

Mavericks weren't contending, but they were still a playoff team and they were fun. It felt as if they would find ways to score forever.

That changed last season.

Dallas averaged 97.9 points per game, the fewest in the

league by 2.6—a plummet that underlined the team's identity crisis, which for a decade had been built around Nowitzki's brilliance. Now, with Dirk in decline—his scoring averaged dipped by 4.1 points last season—the Mavs don't score as they once did, but they don't defend much, either. They look young in some key places (rookie Dennis Smith,

Nerlens Noel) but old in others (Nowitzki, J.J. Barea, Wes Matthews), and it's not clear what the plan is.

Dallas will be on the outside of a crowded playoff race in the West, but maybe that's O.K. If one more miserable year caught between two eras forces the Mavericks to commit to a new look—old or young, offense or defense—it will be a step forward.

PROJECTED LINEUP 2016-17 STATS

COACH LUKE WALTON
(2nd season with Lakers)

2016-17 RECORD 26-56
(4th in Pacific)

PG LONZO BALL (R)
14.6 PPG; 7.6 APG; 55.1 FG%; 41.2 3FG% →

SG KENTAVIOUS CALDWELL-POPE*
13.8 PPG; 3.3 RPG; 39.9 FG%; 35.0 3FG%

SF BRANDON INGRAM
9.4 PPG; 4.0 RPG; 2.1 APG; 40.2 FG%

PF JULIUS RANDLE
13.2 PPG; 8.6 RPG; 3.6 APG; 48.8 FG%

C BROOK LOPEZ*
20.5 PPG; 5.4 RPG; 47.4 FG%; 34.6 3FG%

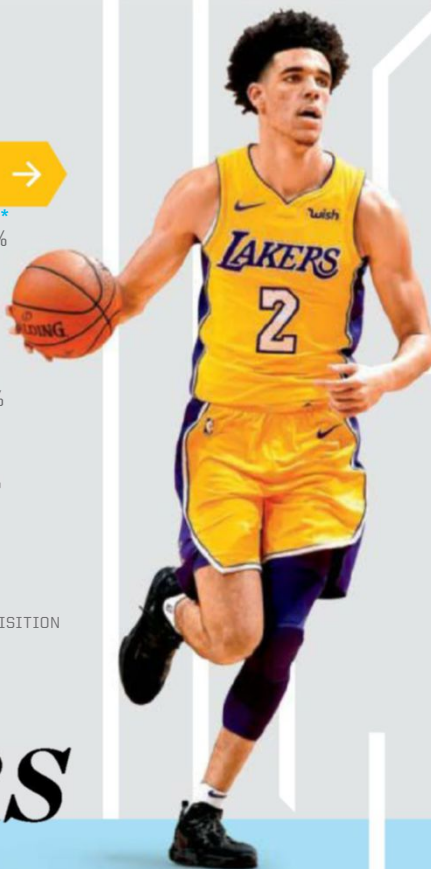
BENCH

SG JORDAN CLARKSON
14.7 PPG; 2.6 APG; 44.5 FG%; 32.9 3FG%

SF LUOL DENG
7.6 PPG; 5.3 RPG; 1.3 APG; 38.7 FG%

PF LARRY NANCE JR.
7.1 PPG; 5.9 RPG; 1.5 APG; 52.6 FG%

● THE CROSSOVER TOP 100 RANKING *NEW ACQUISITION
(R) ROOKIE, COLLEGE STATS



ENEMY LINES

A RIVAL SCOUT SIZES
UP LOS ANGELES

The worst is over. **LONZO BALL** gives them real momentum, and they've got legitimately intriguing young guys. . . . They'll have one of the worst defenses in the league again. They'll just try to outscore you and make it a track meet. . . . Ball is my favorite for Rookie of the Year. I don't think he'll be better than a hot-and-cold shooter, but I'd rather have Ball than Ben Simmons or Markelle Fultz to start a franchise. Ball has that old-school feel. He does more for his team than other young prospects, and he fits cleanly into lineups. It's not crazy to say he could finish in the top five in assists. . . . I like the **KENTAVIOUS CALDWELL-POPE** signing for two reasons: Ball's passing and tempo should help him slide into a more comfortable offensive role, and Caldwell-Pope's defense should really help cover for Ball. . . . **BRANDON INGRAM** is a great breakout candidate because all eyes are going to be on Ball. **LUKE WALTON** made Ingram earn his starting spot last year; he earned it, and he's ready for more. His confidence is growing and he's got a deep package of moves. We might still be one year away from him being a show-stopper. . . . This is a gigantic year for **JULIUS RANDLE**. I'm still not convinced he's going to get it. He's not a good team defender. He can't shoot. He doesn't play above interior defenders. I don't think he can grow out of some of those limitations. All of Randle's best plays come in the open court. When the game slows down in the playoffs, what does he do for you? . . . **KYLE KUZMA** looked like a steal in Summer League. His shooting and energy were exciting.

WESTERN CONFERENCE

LAKERS

TELLING

29.4

STATISTIC

Name a star to hit free agency sometime in the next two years, and there's a rumor linking him to the Lakers. But in the middle of all this smoke, there are two players who can create fire in Los Angeles.

Lonzo Ball will be tested every night by guards

gunning for his head—thanks, Dad!—and it won't be easy to live up to the considerable hype. Still, if Ball's passing gifts translate to the NBA, he'll be creating easy looks for teammates all over the floor.

Then there's Brandon Ingram. He

struggled to get comfortable as a rail-thin rookie on a 26-win team, but he still checks every box for a modern All-Star. He can guard multiple positions at 6'9", and he's got vision as a passer, a decent handle, good athleticism. His shooting is a different story. **Ingram made just 29.4% of his three-point attempts** last year. If his accuracy

catches up with all the other tools this year, he'll become the sort of improving-every-month young star who makes life easier for the rest of the roster.

The Lakers won't make the postseason in 2018, but that's not the point. If the young players can show enough this year to attract help over summer, that will be when the real fun begins.

BOTTOM LINE | They'll be in development mode for one more year, and if Ball's play can attract free agents, watch out.

PROJECTED LINEUP 2016-17 STATS

COACH DAVE JOERGER
(2nd season with Kings)

2016-17 RECORD 32-50
(3rd in Pacific)

PG GEORGE HILL*
16.9 PPG; 4.2 APG; 47.7 FG%; 40.3 3FG%

SG BUDDY HIELD
10.6 PPG; 3.3 RPG; 42.6 FG%; 39.1 3FG% →

SF JUSTIN JACKSON (R)
18.3 PPG; 4.7 RPG; 44.3 FG%; 37.0 3FG%

PF SKAL LABISSIERE
8.8 PPG; 4.9 RPG; 0.4 BPG; 53.7 FG%

C WILLIE CAULEY-STEIN
8.1 PPG; 4.5 RPG; 0.6 BPG; 53.0 FG%

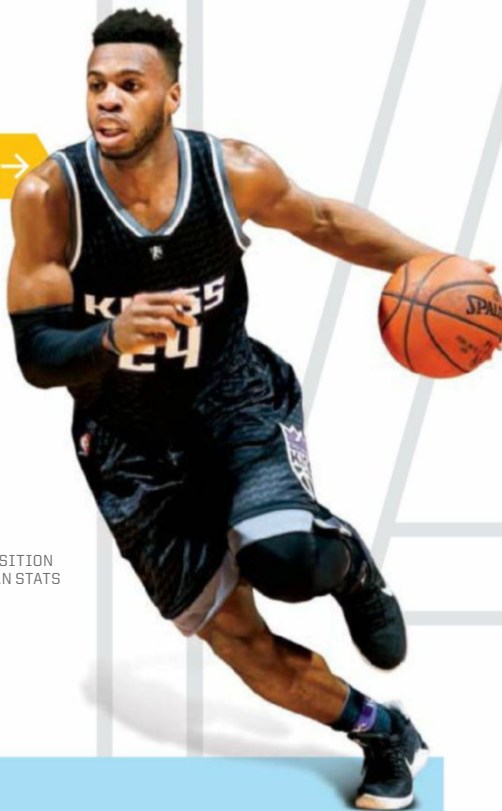
BENCH

PF ZACH RANDOLPH*
14.1 PPG; 8.2 RPG; 1.7 APG; 44.9 FG%

PG DE'AARON FOX (R)
16.7 PPG; 4.6 APG; 47.9 FG%; 24.6 3FG%

SG BOGDAN BOGDANOVIC (R*)
14.6 PPG; 3.8 RPG; 50.0 FG%; 43.0 FG%

● THE CROSSOVER TOP 100 RANKING *NEW ACQUISITION
(R) ROOKIE, COLLEGE STATS (R*) ROOKIE, EUROPEAN STATS



ENEMY LINES

A RIVAL SCOUT SIZES
UP SACRAMENTO

I love that they enter this season fresh without DeMarcus Cousins's trade and free agency talk hanging over them. They can play free and happy. Cousins is talented but it wasn't worth turning over their franchise's direction to him. . . . I understand people who question how good they can be if **GEORGE HILL** is their best player. But he's a good two-way player and a leader, which they needed. I like that he can run the point and he can play alongside their rookie, **DE'AARON FOX**. . . . Fox has All-Star potential long-term, and I don't see anyone else on this roster who you can say that about. His speed gets compared with John Wall's, but that's unfair for any rookie point guard. With his size, I'm worried about how long he can stay on the court. He needs to build out a jumper and prove he can run an offense. . . . **BUDDY HIELD** will be better this year because he can settle into a role. Their offense is going to come from lots of different sources rather than just leaning on him. . . . **JUSTIN JACKSON** had a good Summer League; he's always up to stuff. I don't see a huge ceiling for him, but he can be a solid, steady pro for 12 years. . . . **BOGDAN BOGDANOVIC** is a great shooter. He's ready to hit the ground running. He's a really good catch-and-shoot player. If he gets a clean look, you think it's going in. . . . **WILLIE CAULEY-STEIN** isn't as experienced as **KOSTA KOUFOS**, but he's the guy you want to groom as the center of the future. His offensive game is very limited but he's active, and he gets up above the rim to challenge shots. You want his motor in the middle of your defense.

WESTERN CONFERENCE

KINGS

TELLING

17.3

STATISTIC

When All-Star center DeMarcus Cousins was traded to the Pelicans last February, he left behind a vacuum—one that gave the rest of the Kings' roster room to breathe. Willie Cauley-Stein looked promising at center. New arrival Buddy Hield averaged 15.1 points per game on 48.0% shooting and looked like a legitimate starter. And after a disappointing freshman year at Kentucky sent him tumbling to the 28th pick in the 2016

draft, 6'11" Skal Labissiere had nights where he looked like the lottery talent that scouts had fallen in love with in high school.

Labissiere averaged 17.3 points per 36 minutes after Cousins was traded.

Now there's another new layer of talent. Lightning-quick rookie De'Aaron Fox will pair with the steadying hand of George Hill at the point. Small forward

Justin Jackson is fresh off a national title at North Carolina. And Bogdan Bogdanovic arrives from Europe with a dead-eye touch.

There are intriguing young players in Sacramento surrounded by the right veterans (Zach Randolph, Vince Carter) to help them grow. For a franchise that's been spinning its wheels for the past decade, that's progress.

PROJECTED LINEUP 2016-17 STATS

COACH EARL WATSON
(3rd season with Suns)

2016-17 RECORD 24-58
(5th in Pacific)

PG 39 ERIC BLEDSOE
21.1 PPG; 6.3 APG; 43.4 FG%; 33.5 3FG%

SG 64 DEVIN BOOKER
22.1 PPG; 3.4 APG; 42.3 FG%; 36.3 3FG%

SF JOSH JACKSON (R)
16.3 PPG; 7.4 RPG; 51.3 FG%; 37.8 3FG% →

PF MARQUESE CHRISS
9.2 PPG; 4.2 RPG; 0.9 BPG; 44.9 FG%

C TYSON CHANDLER
8.4 PPG; 11.5 RPG; 0.5 BPG; 67.1 FG%

BENCH

SF TJ WARREN
14.4 PPG; 5.1 RPG; 49.5 FG%; 26.5 3FG%

PG TYLER ULIS
7.3 PPG; 3.7 APG; 0.8 SPG; 42.1 FG%

PF DRAGAN BENDER
3.4 PPG; 2.4 RPG; 35.4 FG%; 27.7 3FG%

● THE CROSSOVER TOP 100 RANKING (R) ROOKIE, COLLEGE STATS



ENEMY LINES

A RIVAL SCOUT SIZES
UP PHOENIX

I don't see a direction for them. They added a lottery pick in **JOSH JACKSON**, but that was their entire summer. It's like they want to be forgotten. They're just praying that **DEVIN BOOKER** becomes a top five shooting guard. This is a pretty hopeless situation. . . . It's hard to put together one single five-man lineup that gets you excited, mostly because their frontcourt is so thin. They can't stop anyone. . . . Among the young prospects at his position, I think Booker is the best all-around scorer. He can score out of pick-and-rolls and isolations. He can catch-and-shoot. He has all those levels and layers. . . . How many guys really complement Booker and can be part of the core? Jackson, I guess, but not really anyone else. **DRAGAN BENDER** and **MARQUESE CHRISS** are both question marks after shaky rookie years. I'm not even a big Jackson fan. His defense, size and athleticism will help, but his shooting motion is a mess. . . . We've reached the point where you have to conclude that **ERIC BLEDSOE** can't be the main guy for a winning team. He's probably their best trade piece, but **BRANDON KNIGHT** falling off a cliff and getting injured again killed their ability to move Bledsoe. . . . Chriss and Bender both look disinterested at times. They're too young to be checking out. Bender will have to play center; defending on the perimeter is a huge challenge for him. Chriss has a better body and physical tools, but I'd bet both are busts. Chriss has to improve his basketball IQ and awareness to have any shot. An unstructured environment like Phoenix was the worst place for him.

WESTERN CONFERENCE

SUNS

TELLING

21

STATISTIC

There are probably some basketball fans who have luggage older than the guys the Suns were running out at the end of last season. Eric Bledsoe is 27 and he seems like a grizzled veteran. Tyson Chandler is 35, and he may as well be a

character from the Old Testament. The **starting five that closed the season for Phoenix had an average age of just over 21 years.**

It's not that the Suns want to rebuild forever. They pursued LaMarcus Aldridge a few

years ago, and they were chasing Blake Griffin and Paul Millsap before missing out this summer. They were linked with a move for Kyrie Irving before he was sent to Boston. For now, that leaves the young guys.

At 20, Devin Booker might be the best perimeter prospect in the league. Josh Jackson, also 20, should provide some much-needed help

on defense, and his off-ball movement will be a boon to Bledsoe and Booker. Marquese Chriss—yes, he's 20, too—will have to be more consistent on both ends, but he has all the tools to be a star.

In fact, Chriss personifies the whole team. There are intriguing tools, there is talent, but at least for this season, there won't be a ton of consistency.

BOTTOM LINE | Bledsoe is good and Booker should be great, but the Suns need one more star to emerge before they move toward the playoffs.



WINNING WAYS

West (far right) came to the Warriors in 2011, when they were searching for credibility—and left as they clinched their second championship in three years.

*No one has been
but last season's
man in the NBA
Warriors and*

GOLDEN DAYS

JUNE 9, 2017

The room is dark at sunset, though no darker than the mood. Jerry West, his wife, Karen, and a visitor are watching the Game 4 broadcast of the 2017 NBA Finals from Quicken Loans Arena in Cleveland on a large TV in the large living room of their large home in the Bel Air section of Los Angeles. So are five yapping dogs, a couple of which are in as bad a mood as Jerry.

A long time ago, when he was on a road trip with the Los Angeles Lakers, West was kept up all night by the incessant barking of dogs in his New York City hotel room. When he complained to the front desk, he was told, "We're sorry, Mr. West, but the dogs are our guests too. They're competing at the

Westminster Dog Show." Such was life in the NBA back then.

"The dog who nips belongs to Ryan," says Karen West. (The man who nips belongs to Karen.) The Wests' older son dropped off his two dogs so he could take a yapless birthday trip to the desert.

When Ryan, now the assistant general manager for the Lakers, turned six in 1985, 32 years ago to this day, his father was watching another Finals on TV. As Ryan's birthday party went on, Jerry kept his eyes on his Lakers. To be accurate, he had been keeping his ears on them, since his cable had gone out during the party. West preferred listening to Lakers an-



ROCKY WIDNER/NBAE/GETTY IMAGES

BY JACK MCCALLUM

Photograph by
Jesse D. Garrabrant/
NBAE/Getty Images



involved in more NBA Finals—22—than Jerry West, Warriors championship was bittersweet for the logo. A vital part of yesterday's Lakers, today's now tomorrow's Clippers, West remains, at 79, still the beating heart of California basketball



nouncer Chick Hearn anyway, so it was Hearn who brought him the joyful play-by-play during which L.A. beat the Celtics at Boston Garden in Game 6 to win the NBA championship. It remains among West's top memories, perhaps the best memory, for it partially erased (emphasis on partially) the specter of so many defeats on that cursed parquet floor, defeats that scar his soul and, to his mind, define his career.

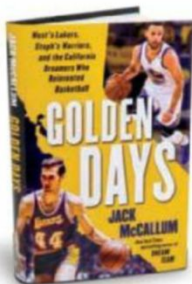
The 1985 win was so singularly satisfying that one wonders if West regrets, even decades later, not being there to celebrate with the team he had assembled as general manager. For that matter, why isn't he in Cleveland right now? The Warriors, for whom at the moment he is a consultant, part owner and member of the executive board, came into the game with a 3-0 series lead, the opportunity to become the first team to go through the playoffs undefeated and capture their second championship in three seasons. Why not be there to share the love, take a bow for a job well done and spray some champagne?

"Oh, hell, I never wanted to go on the road," says West, squirming in his well-worn spot on the couch. "You feel like you're a distraction when you're around. There's enough going on there that they don't need me. The other thing is, when you're in crowds you get so many people. . . Look, some are very nice. I understand they want a picture, and I don't like to say no. But, my Gawd! So many. I enjoy being around people. But not that much."

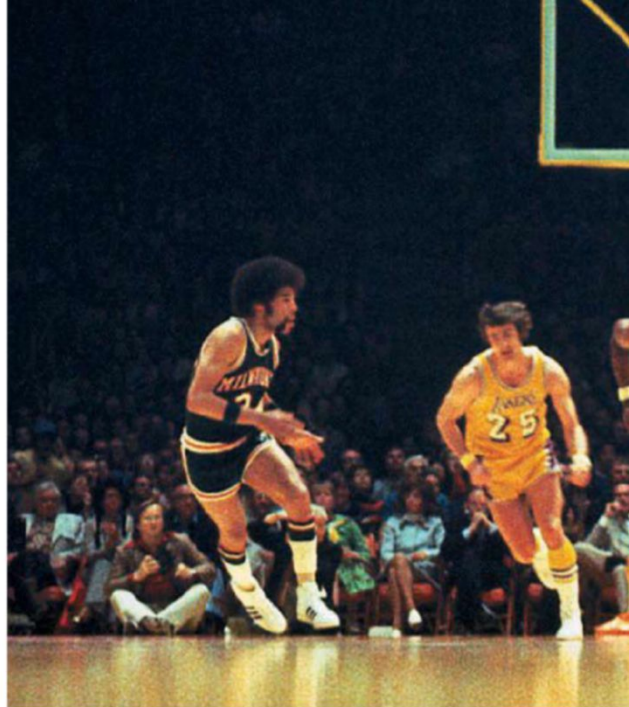
"Dammit, Zaza, why would you foul him?" (Warriors center Zaza Pachulia commits a foul on LeBron James, who then finishes a three-point play.)

When he's out in public, a steady stream of cellphone-holding supplicants does indeed seek out the quite recognizable visage of West, who turned 79 a few days before the Finals began. He's one of those carved-in-granite legends, wide eyes, nine-times-broken nose, his sharp features settled in on themselves, a handsome man, his overall look less haunted than it once was. West does not go anywhere without being recognized, and he invariably complies for a photo, duct-taping a smile to his face as he hunches over to get his still-erect 6' 3" frame into the shot.

Over the years West did attend a few postseason games when he was a general manager, but not many and never during a championship series. Pat Riley, a former teammate and fellow Lakers immortal with whom West shares

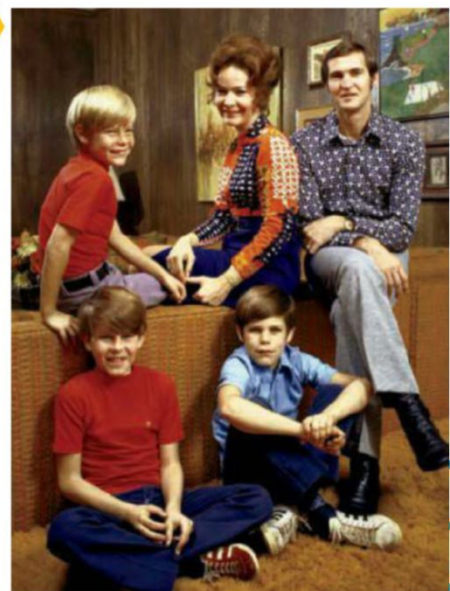


Excerpted from *Golden Days: West's Lakers, Steph's Warriors, and the California Dreamers Who Reinvented Basketball* by Jack McCallum. Copyright © 2017. Used by permission of Random House. All rights reserved.



A GOOD YEAR →

The Lakers' 1971-72 championship season was a highlight for West (44, above; right, with first wife Martha Jane and their sons).



so much NBA history, says there is another reason that he stays home. "Jerry thinks he brings his teams bad luck," says Riley, president of the Miami Heat. "It's from all those painful losses in the '60s."

"Steph, you gotta get up on him!" (Warriors guard Stephen Curry goes under, instead of fighting his way over, a screen, and J. R. Smith gets loose for a three-pointer.)

As West watches at home, he is almost positive that he is a de facto ex-Warrior. There could be a saving phone call over the weekend, but it doesn't look good. He is apparently heading for the Los Angeles Clippers, who are in the process of applying a full-court press on West. The Clips, who despite much promise over recent years have never made it to even a conference final,



JERRY WEST

need West in the same way the Warriors needed him a half dozen years ago; in fact, his position as consultant would be almost identical to the one he holds at Golden State.

But . . . West a *Clipper*? Over a decade ago he went to the Memphis Grizzlies, and while he did a solid job, we kind of forgot that he was there. Then it took a couple of years to come to grips with the fact that West was a Warrior, which we came to understand only when Golden State got good; West is almost always associated with good.

For West, it has been a wrenching ordeal to drift apart from Golden State, an organization that signed him in 2011 when it was looking for the kind of credibility that only

Curry had become a superstar, and the Warriors had become a smooth-running machine with its major parts (Curry, Kevin Durant, Draymond Green, Klay Thompson and Andre Iguodala) all signed at least through the '18–19 season. The Warriors seemed to be on automatic pilot, and West's handiwork would not be needed nearly as much as it had been.

In light of that, primary owner Joe Lacob thought it justified to adjust West's compensation downward. Exact figures are hard to come by because West's salary was partly dictated by franchise evaluation and some monies were deferred to enable him to buy a small stake in the team—remember that “small” in this business means as much as \$1 million.

“I DON’T LIKE TO SAY NO,” SAYS WEST. “BUT, MY GAWD! I ENJOY BEING AROUND PEOPLE. BUT NOT THAT MUCH.”

he could provide. No one around the NBA believes it was mere coincidence that West was part of the management team when the Warriors rose from the ashes of an undistinguished past. He had been a major part of the Golden State decision-making apparatus as the Warriors added pieces, both by the draft and free agency, to build a team that has become a model in pro sports.

And that success, in effect, speaks largely to why West might be gone. Bob Myers was a general manager in training when West came aboard, Curry was the only major piece then on the roster, and there was no sign that the Warriors would be anything but a fair-to-middling club. But by 2017 Myers had become a two-time NBA Executive of the Year,

But the best estimate is that West was asked to take what one source called a “material” pay cut to about \$1 million. The best guess on *material* is about 50%, meaning that West had been making about \$2 million. (Neither West nor Lacob would comment directly on dollar figures.)

The apparent separation, however, has done nothing to diminish West's feeling for the Warriors' players, with whom he remains close. And it is killing him that they're getting beaten so badly.

“We just have no energy. Look at our body language. It's whor-a-bull.” (The Warriors are behind 29–13 and slump off the court after a timeout.)

This is the 22nd championship series in which West has



been personally invested, either as a player, team executive or consultant. Thousands of NBA players, coaches and front-office folk have come and gone without ever knowing the feel of Finals pressure, yet West's heart—the prisoner of arrhythmia, by the way—has been racing in 22. Twenty-two! Red Auerbach, as coach and general overseer of the Celtics, was involved in 18 championship series, and Phil Jackson was involved in 14 as a player and a coach. No one else comes close to West. Were he not the official logo of the league, the NBA would've had to make him the official logo of the Finals.

Ah, but what would that logo look like if it were to truly capture the West essence? Could it show pain as well as joy, agony as well as ecstasy? Could it be ambivalent? Could West be shown as a kind of Janus, looking both forward and backward with downcast expression, past and present mutually unsatisfying? For though West almost always performed brilliantly under championship pressure as a competitor—he remains the only player from a losing team to win a Finals MVP award, which happened in 1969—he lost his first seven Finals appearances and triumphed in only one of nine overall, in the magical season of '71–72. As a player, West was a cross between Job and Sisyphus, heartache upon heartache, disappointment upon disappointment, his championship rock always rolling back down the hill. It was a storied career woven into what he considered a tapestry of failure, his lone championship notwithstanding.

"The pain of losing," he has said over and over, "is so much stronger than the joy of winning."

"You know why he got that rebound, Kevin? Because you didn't block him out." (Durant, West's favorite player on the Warriors and one of his favorite players in the league, along with James and San Antonio's Kawhi Leonard, has indeed allowed Richard Jefferson to secure an offensive rebound.)

Nobody gets away unscathed when West watches a game. No-body.

GOLDEN DAYS, the book from which this excerpt is taken, is a tale of yesterday's Lakers—a historically significant team led by West and Wilt Chamberlain—and today's Warriors, a team that is rapidly building its own legend. The teams share not only a common state, but also shared an uncommon man.

The teams hold a place near each other in the record book for extraordinary displays of sustained excellence in a sport defined by attrition. During the 1971–72 season, the Lakers—considered by many to be too old, too contentious

CLOSE TIES →

Despite his split with ownership, West is still close to many Warriors players, including Curry (near right) and Durant (far right).



and too scarred by past failures—won 33 games in a row, more than any team in any of the four major pro sports, a record that stands today. West, near the end of a storied career that would have been empty without a championship, was that team's haunted essence.

The Warriors are the ultimate modern streak team. In the 2014–15 season they won 16 in a row early and 12 more consecutively later en route to the NBA championship, only the second in franchise history. They began the '15–16 season with 24 straight victories, which, added to the three straight they had won in the '15 Finals, gave them 27 wins in a row, a mark that ties them with the '12–13 Miami Heat and is second only to the Lakers'. In the '16–17 season Golden State won 14 in a row, from March 14 through April 8 (all but one without an injured Durant), then ripped off 15 wins in a row in the postseason, before falling on this Friday night in Cleveland, as West and his wife and the yapping dogs look on, darkness descending on their home near fabled Sunset Boulevard, where they have lived for the past 38 years.

It's interesting that yesterday's Lakers and today's Warriors intersect across time, because there has rarely been a connection between the franchises in actual time. There is a simple reason for that. Over the past half century the Lakers have been dominant, and the Warriors, aside from one magical season in the mid-1970s, have been somewhere between abysmal and mediocre. Until recently no one battled for the "bragging rights of California pro basketball"; equally disdainful of the Warriors to the north and the Clippers across



“THE PAIN OF LOSING,” WEST HAS SAID, “IS SO MUCH STRONGER THAN THE JOY OF WINNING.”

town—let’s not even get into the Sacramento Kings—the Lakers owned both of them lock, stock and barrel.

But not now. Oh, not now.

“I look at Steph Curry and what he’s done and the popularity of the Warriors, and I’m envious. Not jealous. Jealous is, *I don’t want you to have it or anyone else to have it*. Envy is, *I want what they have*.” Those words were spoken in 2017 by Jeanie Buss, the controlling owner and president of the Lakers, who even five years ago would never have dreamed about a time when the no-account NoCal Warriors were more glitzy, more admired, more flavor-of-the-day than her so-cool SoCal Lakers.

“You know what I might do now? It sounds crazy. But put Steph on Kyrie. Sometimes when you’re going bad offensively, you can wake a guy up that way. Maybe he gets his ass torched, but at least you’re trying something.”

The West Lakers played in what now seems to be a shadowy Mesozoic Era, arenas lit by candle, cave drawings on the locker-room walls. Teams flew commercial and scrounged for even local TV exposure. In the process of winning every game from Nov. 5, 1971, until Jan. 9, 1972, the Lakers crossed the continent four times, with train rides to Boston and Baltimore thrown in for good measure. On four occasions during the streak they played three nights in a row, and during one hellacious stretch in November they played five times in six nights. For per diem, they received a cool nine bucks a day.

The owner of the Lakers for much of West’s career was a Canadian named Jack Kent Cooke, who emerged from central casting as the pretentious, gaseous millionaire, complete with ascot in the pocket. Cooke, who gave his two sons and one daughter the middle name Kent, cranked out

orders like a pompous organ-grinder, arrogance his default mode. He had undeniable imagination and a nose for hiring talent, but he was a notorious penny-pincher who, among other things, refused to okay funds for a new projector that was needed for game preparation. Bill Bertka, a Lakers scout who is still with the team, used a pencil to hold the spool of the old projector in place.

Race was a leitmotif in West’s era, as the nation’s white fans struggled with the reality that African-American athletes were starting to dominate in the major sports, particularly basketball, and black athletes were trying to figure out how many indignities to endure without speaking up. Two of the central figures in that struggle, Elgin Baylor and Chamberlain, played with West.

Debate over the war in Vietnam, scaled down but still raging—2,414 American soldiers died in 1971 and another 759 the following year—continued to divide the country. Los Angeles itself was still reeling from both the ’65 Watts riots and the ’69 Charles Manson murders. A parade of Manson-related trials, bloody narrative always at the center, served as a grim backdrop to the Lakers’ streak season.

How times have changed. Today’s Warriors are owned by a deep-pocketed conglomerate headed by venture capitalist Lacob, who in 2010 brought in several of his fellow Silicon Valley heavyweights to steal the franchise away from Larry Ellison, then the CEO of Oracle and the sixth-richest man in the world. The Warriors tilt another way too, toward Hollywood, through the influence of legendary producer



and studio head Peter Guber, who is second in command to Lacob. There is no Cooke-style vertical management on a Lacob-Guber team. (No ascots either.) The contemporary Golden State franchise operates nimbly and democratically, a fusion of Silicon Valley and Hollywood.

Then, too, the current Warriors hurl themselves into the social and political issues of the day like divers from a dock. After the 2016 election Kerr emerged as a fervent critic of Donald Trump, part of a vocal NBA pack that took the lead in speaking out, pushing back against the code that sports figures should just play the game. Curry, for his part, weighs in on anything and everything—bullying in schools, violence against women, the policies of Trump.

West seemed to feel the tug of the Warriors' sociopoliti-



WESTERN UNION ↑

Having already shaped two franchises at key points in their history, West hopes to leave his mark on yet another California team.

a dribbling silhouette. West speaks of race and social responsibility and pledges fealty to the notion that an athlete shouldn't surrender his voice just because he plays ball. When he is asked to speak these days, his audience expects stories of Wilt and Oscar [Robertson] and Elgin and the good old days, and, while they get some of those, they're just as likely to get a West who talks about race and personal responsibility and maybe even a little politics. The men with whom he plays golf and gin rummy at Bel-Air Country Club weren't too happy when he supported Barack Obama.

West's desire to speak out seems tied to a minor regret

cal bent. He wants to get out the message that many things away from basketball are important to him, to convey the idea that he is something beyond

that he remained relatively quiet when he was a player. Chamberlain, for one, held West's anodyne nature against him. But it was a different time, and voicing opinions wasn't West's way back then.

In 2011 he published an autobiography called *West by West: My Charmed, Tormented Life*, cowritten with Jonathan Coleman, a book that was extraordinary in its honesty, revealing a man who has struggled with depression and been raked with inner turmoil and rage against an unloving father and the emotional deprivations of his boyhood in West Virginia. He is still trying to work out those demons.

"I'm a lot deeper thinker than most people think I am," says West. "I mean, a lot. I wouldn't hold my tongue so much if I was still playing now."

"Kevin Durant has 22 damn points, and you didn't even know he was out there. Been that kind of game." (West loves efficient scorers, which is what he was. He sees Durant in that light.)

THE PHONE CALL that would keep West with the Warriors doesn't come that weekend, and West is gone by the beginning of Game 5, three nights later, though not everyone in the organization knows it.

Some consider the breakup to have been inevitable. Perhaps West had done all he could with this golden franchise in the Golden State. And won't working for the Clippers be easier for West? Every time he went to the Bay Area, he had to hop on a plane—well, a nice private model belonging to one of the plane-rich Warriors owners—whereas the Clippers' offices in Playa Vista and games at the Staples Center are only a drive away. The Clippers need some fixing, and, even at his age, West is considered a Mr. Fix-it.

In the days that followed the news that West had left, the parties remained civil. Lacob called West "an incredible asset to our organization over the last six years" and insisted that he had wanted West to remain with the franchise, albeit at the lower figure. West called Golden State "the best-run organization I've ever been around." There is no reason to disbelieve either of those sentiments.

But undeniably, West's feelings were hurt, more so because the Warriors are an organization swimming in cash, the franchise value having increased at least sixfold since Lacob and Guber bought it in 2010. If Lacob saw West's relationship with the Warriors as transactional, West saw it as more as a marriage. And now someone was telling him he wasn't wanted, or at least wasn't wanted as much as he once was. Don't tell Jerry West that something is not personal; it's almost always personal.

Down the road, when the endless game of chance that is professional sports starts to turn against the Warriors, when injuries and intrigue build and wholesale changes have to be made, will they miss the man who always seemed to have an answer? Will they ever wonder: Now, why exactly did we let Jerry West get away?

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DEAN OF IMPUDENCE

→ BY MICHAEL ROSENBERG

CONGRATULATIONS, DEAN SPANOS. You have done what Donald Trump, Roger Goodell, Colin Kaepernick and a ballroom full of concussion researchers could not: You made people stop watching an NFL team.

I must admit, I didn't think this was possible. The NFL could sell beef to vegans, lawnmowers to apartment-dwellers, rat poison to a rat. Sure, the league's TV ratings have fallen a bit, but the NFL is still an entertainment giant: the NBA and *The Avengers* and Beyoncé rolled into one.

Enter 67-year-old Dean Spanos, stage left—which obviously means he was supposed to enter stage right. The Spanos family has owned the Chargers for 33 years, but he grew unhappy with his stadium in San Diego. His solution: Complain to the city council and then hide in his house. Then he took his team out of San Diego, a small market where people thought he was a cheap, inept weasel, to Los Angeles, a large market where people think he is a cheap, inept weasel.

The Chargers are supposed to share a \$2.6 billion stadium with the Rams, who moved back to Los Angeles from St. Louis in 2016. Spanos announced the move with a well-crafted press release: "Hey-yo, this is Dean Spanos, I love small children, please buy tickets for the **San Diego** Los Angeles Chargers football product—on sale now!!!" He then unveiled a logo that appeared to have been drawn by a seven-year-old with a crayon, in a bumper car.

Unfortunately, when Spanos arrived in L.A. after sitting in traffic for three days, he discovered that the stadium was not ready. Apparently officials are still assembling the sign outside that reads PROUD HOME OF THE RAMS, ETC.

And now look. Or don't. Nobody is going to Chargers games. There were just 25,000 people at each of their first three games in the ironically named StubHub Center. I've attended weddings with more paid guests.

Worse: many—perhaps most—of the fans were cheering for the visiting Dolphins, Chiefs or Eagles. Chargers players have come to accept that they are playing 16 road games. Their mascot should be Jack Kerouac.

Spanos seemed to think that Los Angeles was dying for a second NFL team, which is funny because we weren't sure L.A. wanted a first NFL team.



WHICH NFL TEAM HAS THE BEST FANS?
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Spanos seemed to think that Los Angeles was dying for a second NFL team, which is funny because no one was sure L.A. wanted a first NFL team. The city did just fine for two decades after the Rams and the Raiders left town. Still, the Rams' moving back made some business and karmic sense: L.A. should have an NFL team, and the city simply repossessed the Rams after St. Louis swiped them in the '90s.

Giving L.A. a second NFL team is like giving Miami a second snowplow. Nobody asked for it, nobody wants it and nobody knows what to do with it. Spanos has said publicly that he hopes San Diegans still support their Chargers and will drive the 120 miles to L.A. You might as well ask your first wife to pay your second wife's car payments. San Diego has too much self-respect to do that.

America's football fans will do a lot to support their teams. Clevelanders have happily watched the Browns play horrible football in ugly uniforms. Detroiters have always loved the Lions even though most of the time the Lions couldn't figure out how to love them back.

Those cities support their teams because the franchises are just that: *their* teams. The Chargers are nobody's team. San Diego is mad at them. Los Angeles did not invite them.

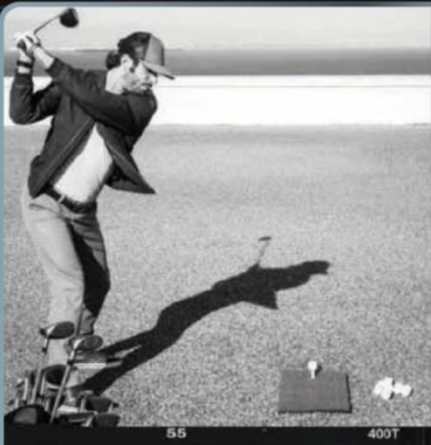
This could all change eventually, I suppose, if the Rams are awful and the Chargers are good. L.A. could forget this is an arranged marriage and decide to live happily ever after with the Chargers.

But for now the Chargers are the party guests who keep pouring themselves more drinks while everybody else fake-yawns and checks their watches.

So congratulations, Dean. You found a way to make people boycott NFL games, and you didn't even have to pay for picket signs. □



SPORTS ILLUSTRATED (ISSN 0038-822X) is published weekly, with skipped issues in January, March, May, June, August, September, October and November with two skipped issues in February, April and July, by Time Inc. Principal Office: 225 Liberty Street, New York, NY 10281. Periodicals postage paid at New York, NY, and additional mailing offices. Canada Post Publications Mail Agreement No. 40110178. Return undeliverable Canada addresses through the UPM process: GST #R88381621R7001. U.S. Subscriptions: \$65 for one year; SUBSCRIBERS: If the postal service alerts us that your magazine is undeliverable, we have no further obligation unless we receive a corrected address within two years. Your bank may provide updates to the card information we have on file. You may opt out of this service at any time. POSTMASTER: Send all UAA to CFS. See DM 7074.12.5. NON-POSTAL AND MILITARY FACILITIES: send address corrections to Post Office Box 62120, Tampa, FL 33662-2120. MAILING LIST: We make a portion of our mailing list available to reputable firms. If you would prefer that we not include your name, please call or write us. ©2017 TIME INC. ALL RIGHTS RESERVED. REPRODUCTION IN WHOLE OR IN PART WITHOUT PERMISSION IS PROHIBITED. SPORTS ILLUSTRATED IS A REGISTERED TRADEMARK OF TIME INC. CUSTOMER SERVICE AND SUBSCRIPTIONS: For 24/7 service, please use our website: www.SI.com/customerservice You can also call 1-800-528-5000 or write to SI at P.O. Box 62120, Tampa, FL 33662-2120.



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